

“NOT WITHOUT A HISTORY”:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOOLHOUSES IN  
GIBSON COUNTY, TENNESSEE

BY

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## ABSTRACT

An aging generation of African Americans and many African American communities across the South are seeking ways to preserve their legacy of educational heritage. Large portions of this heritage are the schoolhouses in which they were educated. While many rural, African American schoolhouses across the South have been lost to age and neglect, those that remain constitute the material culture of segregated education, and African American perseverance during Jim Crow. This thesis not only focuses on African American educational history and desegregation, but also the community-based preservation of African American schoolhouses in Gibson County, Tennessee. These schools include Mt. Zion Negro School (Bradford), Polk-Clark School (Milan), Trenton Rosenwald School (Trenton), and Sitka School (Sitka). Despite discriminatory circumstances, African American children still thrived in their classrooms. This thesis does not, however, argue that segregation was a better educational environment for African American children. Rather, it highlights the value found in segregated schooling. I argue that strong affiliation with these schools and the potential loss of this educational heritage are among the reasons driving these communities to preserve their schools.

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## INTRODUCTION

“African American children are not without a history, though discussions about them are often ahistorical –as though the children just arrived on the educational scene in the 1970s with nothing but a plethora of problems.”<sup>1</sup> –Vanessa Siddle Walker

Indeed, African American children did not just appear in desegregated classrooms without their own history. An aging generation of African Americans and many African American communities across the South are seeking ways to preserve their legacy of educational heritage. An aging generation of African Americans and many African American communities across the South are seeking ways to preserve the legacy of their educational heritage. Large portions of this heritage are the schoolhouses in which they were educated. While many rural, African American schoolhouses across the South have been lost to age and neglect, those that remain constitute the material culture of segregated education, and African American perseverance during Jim Crow. This thesis not only focuses on African American educational history and desegregation, but also the community-based preservation of African American schoolhouses in Gibson County, Tennessee. These schools include Mt. Zion Negro School (Bradford), Polk-Clark School (Milan), Trenton Rosenwald School (Trenton), and Sitka School (Sitka). The former students of these schools provide a unique insight into African American education before desegregation. Their voices add a personal element to what often, in educational history, is devolved to statistics and test scores.

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 10.

Despite discriminatory circumstances, African American children still thrived in their classrooms. This thesis does not, however, argue that segregation was a better educational environment for African American children. Rather, it highlights the value found in segregated schooling. I argue that strong affiliation with these schools and the potential loss of this educational heritage are among the reasons driving these communities to preserve their schools.

Researching these schools and working with these communities raises many questions. Among the questions that have driven research are: When were these schools built? Who built these schools? What was the source of funding? What community did these schools serve? When did these schools open? When did these schools close? What was the African American student experience in these schools? What was the African American student experience after desegregation? What are the strongest memories associated with these schools? Why do communities want to preserve these schools? What do communities envision for their future use? How do these schools contribute to community identity? What role do these schools play in the educational heritage of Gibson County and Tennessee at large? I argue that these schools were at the heart of Gibson County's rural, African American communities and that communities are preserving them to renew a sense of community identity. Communities seek to share the legacy of the African American struggle for educational and civil equality.

The body of literature written about African American education in the nineteenth and twentieth-century is vast. A discernable shift in this scholarship manifests in historiography that focuses on the agency of African Americans in their educational heritage, rather than victims of segregationist circumstance. New scholarship frequently

features themes of education as central to African American advancement and a key component of obtaining equality in civil rights. I engage this scholarship throughout all chapters and includes, but is not limited to, the works of historians James D. Anderson, Janet Cornelius, Heather Andrea Williams, Mary S. Hoffschwelle, and Elgin L. Klugh.

No research on African American education would be complete without historian James D. Anderson's *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (University of North Carolina Press, 1988). This seminal work, more than twenty-five years later, remains one of the most consulted works on the subject. His work highlights the development of African American education within a system of oppression, which he argues made their education system fundamentally different. Anderson demonstrates the relationships between popular education and the politics of oppression: "schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second class citizenship."<sup>2</sup>

Janet Cornelius looks at the origins of the post-emancipation thirst for education in her book "*When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South*" (University of South Carolina Press, 1991). Cornelius looks at not only what literacy could do for enslaved African Americans, but also what literacy meant to them. She emphasizes that African Americans were not the great illiterate mass they were made out to be. Instead, they had found different ways to educate themselves during slavery in small ways.

Heather Andrea Williams' book, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), is similar to Cornelius'

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<sup>2</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 1.

work. The scholarship builds and expands upon education during slavery and its later impact. Her other topics include African American self-help and determination, the effort to establish education as a civil right, conflicts within the establishment of schools, inadequacy of African American schools with regard to supplies and school buildings, content and availability of textbooks, African American children and adults as students, and the African American influence on white people's interest in education across the South.

The works of historian Mary S. Hoffschwelle are also featured prominently in this thesis. *Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1900-1930* (University of Tennessee Press, 1998) and *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (University Press of Florida, 2005) reinforces the important role of schools in African American communities across the South. Her research on Rosenwald schools is used prominently throughout this thesis as Polk-Clark School and Trenton Rosenwald School were both built with Rosenwald funds and in accordance with Rosenwald designs.

Elgin L. Klugh's PhD dissertation at the University of South Florida, "African American Schoolhouses: Community, History, and Reclamation," is an invaluable work as it constitutes a case study of African American communities preserving their segregation-era school houses in Florida. He argues, as I do, that in preserving these schoolhouses, African American communities "seek to resurrect and display [their] heritage and provide venues where activities can occur to supplement the process of

formal education with inspiring accounts of African American educational values and achievement.”<sup>3</sup>

There is an inherent difficulty in researching rural African American communities and their schools, as much of the pertinent primary source material is absent from the archives. Nevertheless, there are still numerous primary sources that are consulted in this thesis. Among those sources is *Southern Schools News*, a newspaper published by the Southern Education Reporting Service (SERS) that reported unbiased information concerning the developments in education resulting from *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in May 1954. The Tennessee Virtual Archive (TeVA) collection covers issues published in Nashville, Tennessee, from September 1954 to June 1965 (the date of its last publication).

Jeanes Supervisor Reports, particularly those of Carrie Booker Seat (Gibson County’s Jeanes Supervisor), are also used throughout the chapters. Record Group 92 (Commissioner’s Files, 1913-1970) and Record Group 273 (Records, 1874-1984) are each part of Tennessee State Library and Archives’ Department of Education Records. I have also used the correspondence of Dr. W.H. Stillwell (Gibson County’s Superintendent of Education between 1867 and 1870) with General John Eaton to gather information about the state of education in Gibson County immediately following the Civil War. Other primary source material will be mined from “Trials and Triumphs: Tennesseans’ Search for Citizenship, Community, and Opportunity” (a digital collection

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<sup>3</sup> Elgin L. Klugh, “Reclaiming Segregation-Era, African American Schoolhouses: Building on Symbols of Past Cooperation,” *Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 247.

of Middle Tennessee State University), census records, community oral histories, and the physical fabric of the schoolhouses.

Portions of this thesis were completed through various papers, reports, and class projects. Extensive work with Polk-Clark School began in 2010. Dr. Mary S. Hoffschwelle, Dr. Carroll Van West (Director, Center for Historic Preservation), and other staff members at the Center for Historic Preservation worked with the Gibson County Training School/Polk-Clark Alumni Association to place the school in the National Register of Historic Places. In Fall 2012, the Essentials in Historic Preservation and Cultural Resource Management class authored a heritage development plan for the Milan Polk-Clark Enrichment Center (Polk-Clark School's current function). As part of the heritage development plan, members of the class conducted a needs assessment for the school wherein the building's preservation issues were brought to light.

Work with Mt. Zion Negro School and Trenton Rosenwald School began in October 2013 when Hollis Skinner, graduate of Mt. Zion and Trenton Rosenwald, contacted the Center for Historic Preservation about including several sites in Gibson County in the National Register of Historic Places. In November 2013, Dr. Carroll Van West, and Fieldwork Coordinator for the Center for Historic Preservation, Katie Randall, made their first trip to Gibson County to evaluate historic properties. As part of the Spring 2014 Seminar in Historic Preservation and Cultural Resource Management, Denise Gallagher and I chose to develop a report for Mt. Zion, Trenton Rosenwald, and an additional school in Haywood County as our final class project. In February, Dr. West led a second site visit to Gibson County. Skinner led this second site visit to Mt. Zion and



Trenton Rosenwald, providing us with oral histories and other primary source materials he discovered.

My work with Sitka School began in September 2014 when I traveled to Gibson County with Dr. West to document Sitka School's structural condition and meet with alumni. I chose Sitka School as the subject of my architectural survey for Seminar in American Architectural History. Since the original assessment of Sitka School, our knowledge of the school's history and of the county's educational heritage has greatly expanded.

Fieldwork also constitutes a major portion of this thesis. Throughout the writing process, I consulted with the communities to ensure their voices were present within this work. These research methods seek to answer the question of "Why?" Why are these African American communities turning to preservation? Why is preserving these schoolhouses important to them? What does this type of work mean for the future of preservation? Analysis of the answers to these questions will connect the various components detailed within this thesis.

As stated, the geographic scope of this thesis is contained within Tennessee. The temporal scope of the historiography will move from the latter half of the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth-century. Within this scope is the history of each school from their opening to the present, including their fate after desegregation and present preservation efforts.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter I discusses the historiography of African American education in the South. Chapter II covers the history of segregated education in Tennessee, coupled with the history of the development of the public school

system in Tennessee. Chapter III contains the four case studies of African American schools in Gibson County. I have placed the case studies in chronological order of school construction: Mt. Zion Negro School (1920), Polk-Clark School (1926), Trenton Rosenwald School (1928), and Sitka School (1942). I have placed these schools in context with one another, as opposed to each having their own chapter, in order to understand the changes in Gibson County's educational landscape over time. Doing so reveals an overarching educational network and allows for comparison and contrast of the schools and their educational history. Chapter IV looks at the effects of desegregation in Tennessee not just on African American children, but also on schoolhouses. It demonstrates how desegregation led to the need for preservation of these schools and community attempts to reclaim educational heritage and identity.

On the whole, this thesis is not the final word on the histories or preservation of any of these schools. It is, rather, a beginning from which we can further understand community-based preservation and how communities engage with the past.

## CHAPTER I

AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION IN THE  
NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY SOUTH

“The education of blacks in the South reveals that various contending forces sought either to repress the development of black education or to shape it in ways that contradicted blacks’ interests in intellectual development. The educational outcomes demonstrate that blacks got some but not much of what they wanted.”<sup>1</sup> –James D. Anderson

In the last three decades, historians have produced valuable new scholarship on African American education in the South. Historians James D. Anderson’s *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* and Leon F. Litwack’s *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* both explored the significance of education to African Americans living in the Jim Crow South. Historian Mary S. Hoffschwelle’s *Rosenwald Schools of the American South* considered early twentieth-century African American education in depth.<sup>2</sup> Historians have recognized the agency of African Americans in their education and are interested in the study of segregated education because of the era’s “drama, its heroism, and its promise.”<sup>3</sup> The works of Anderson,

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<sup>1</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 285.

<sup>2</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998); Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald E. Butchart, “Outthinking and Outflanking the Owners of the World: A Historiography of the African American Struggle for Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1988): 335.

Litwack, Hoffschwelle, and several others have created valuable historic contexts for public historians and historic preservationists. This thesis, which looks at extant historic rural African American schoolhouses in Gibson County, Tennessee, reflects the growing public history interest in African American community landmarks.

Henry Allen Bullock was one of the first scholars from the second half of the twentieth-century to tackle the broad chronology of African American education. In *A History of Negro Education: from 1619 to the Present*, he “[traced] the development of educational opportunities for Negro Americans in the South” and demonstrated how these educational opportunities “became the means by which the race gained greater personal emancipation.”<sup>4</sup> In 1978, Vincent P. Franklin and James D. Anderson, editors of *New Perspectives on Black Educational History*, suggested African Americans wanted no more or less for their communities than others, but racism, prejudice, and poverty continually thwarted them. Despite these negative forces, black communities beginning in slavery and expanding with emancipation rose to the challenge of championing their educational needs.<sup>5</sup>

The theme of African American active agency quickly became a significant thread in the literature, and this theme has dominated much recent scholarship. Heather Andrea Williams, for instance, examined the acquisition of literacy during slavery in *Self Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. She argued that the

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<sup>4</sup> Henry Allen Bullock, *A History of Negro Education in the South; from 1619 to the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 278.

<sup>5</sup> James D. Anderson and Vincent P. Franklin, eds., *New Perspectives on Black Educational History* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978).

origins of the challenge against compulsory ignorance could be found in the slave cabins of plantations and the back rooms of city dwellings. The ability to read allowed African Americans access to a world beyond bondage where they were free to think and strive to be whom they wanted. They used this secret skill to subvert the relationship between master and slave, fusing their desire for literacy and freedom.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge disturbed the power relations between master and slave that manifested in the master's authority to speak for the slave. Literacy, then, was a method of resistance and ideas of education as resistance became another important thread in the literature.

Before the Civil War, whites feared the revolutionary consequences of African American literacy. In response, white elites in southern states passed legislation outlawing teaching the enslaved, and sometimes outlawing free blacks to read and write. The timing of these anti-literacy laws often reflected the association in white minds between literacy and uprisings.<sup>7</sup> Warnings against teaching slaves to read spread widely, even advising against teaching them to read the Bible (a requirement thought to save one's soul). For African Americans, the mission to become literate often had to be a covert one. Williams described their actions as "stealing" an education. Slaves hid spelling books on their person, always on the ready to entreat or bribe a literate person to teach them. Some blacks even worked with white children who were too young to understand the slave code, or poor whites that did not care. They pursued literacy as a key tool for self-preservation. As historian Janet D. Cornelius earlier suggested, while some

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<sup>6</sup> Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

may have used their literacy skills to escape from slavery, few thought it would have the immediate effect of liberation on their lives. A more immediate goal was to use literacy as a means to “gain advantages for themselves and mediate for their fellow slaves.”<sup>8</sup>

For many nineteenth-century southerners, the notion of a right to education, period, was a radical idea. During the first half of the nineteenth-century, many southern states had not only criminalized educating blacks, they also failed to provide whites with anything resembling a right to education. Schooling in the South was reserved for the wealthy. Less fortunate whites attended school on an irregular basis, if at all, with little or no financial support from the state.<sup>9</sup> There existed among the southern aristocracy the attitude that the masses need not be educated. Born of imperfect social and political institutions, as historian John Hope Franklin pointed out, southerners were reluctant at best to tax themselves for educational purposes and saw little relationship between education and success in life.<sup>10</sup>

In the turmoil of the Civil War and its aftermath, African Americans acquired literacy in a very public way often with the active support of white authorities. Education became vital to African Americans’ efforts to solidify their freedom.<sup>11</sup> They flocked to classrooms in droves and so began a new era of African American life. James D.

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<sup>8</sup> Janet D. Cornelius, “*When I Can Read My Title Clear*”: *Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Self Taught*, 69.

<sup>10</sup> John Hope Franklin, “Jim Crow Goes to School: The Genesis of Legal Segregation in Southern Schools,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (1959): 226.

<sup>11</sup> Cornelius, “*When I Can Read My Title Clear*,” 10.

Anderson, among the most respected scholars in the field, stressed that these actions among former slaves departed in a major way from previously conceived ideologies and social structures in the South. According to Anderson, liberated African Americans were the first native southerners to call for universal, state supported education. Such actions constituted a threat to planters' beliefs in the proper roles of state, church, and family regarding education.<sup>12</sup> In addition, whites felt that African Americans did not contribute enough to the tax base to warrant equitable shares in schools.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of universal education during the Reconstruction era did not necessarily mean racially integrated schools. Early attempts to integrate white and black schools were generally unsuccessful even in states where the law authorized such schools. White southern opposition to state-supported schools of any kind was among the most effective weapons against integration. As historian Paul David Phillips makes clear, when the white community brought forth their full force of violence, African American schools, especially mixed schools, had no chance of succeeding.<sup>14</sup> Even supporters of black education and those who condemned separation of the races were forced into the

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<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Vanessa Siddle Walker, "Valued Segregated Schools for African American Children in the South 1935-1969: A Review of Common Themes and Characteristics," *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 3 (2000): 259.

<sup>14</sup> Paul David Phillips, "Education of Blacks in Tennessee during Reconstruction, 1865-1870," in *Trial and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee's African American History*, ed. Carroll Van West (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 161.

conclusion that only real chance at stability for African American education was creating a racially segregated environment.<sup>15</sup>

William Preston Vaughn took the first comprehensive look at the subject of mixed schools in *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877* in 1974. Advocates of these schools were typically northern politicians, well-meaning reformers, and well-known trailblazers and abolitionists like Charles Sumner and William Lloyd Garrison. With the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau, the federal government also advocated for mixed schools. These pro-integrationists favored mixed schools for a number of reasons: discrimination, in their interpretation, violated the newly approved Fourteenth Amendment; separate facilities inherently meant less funding for blacks and all-black schools would undoubtedly be inferior in both their facilities and funding.<sup>16</sup> Even when integrated schools were made available, many white parents would not send their children to such a school. They would form their own private schools rather than send their children to school with blacks. For many black parents, however, it was more important to send their children to school in general than worry about the racial composition of the classroom.

The Freedmen's Bureau helped to consolidate the previously established system of grassroots schools, and many freedmen's aid and missionary groups went to the Freedmen's Bureau for assistance.<sup>17</sup> The Bureau accessioned abandoned and government

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<sup>15</sup> Franklin, "Jim Crow Goes to School," 230-31.

<sup>16</sup> William Preston Vaughn, *Schools for All: The Blacks and Public Education in the South, 1865-1877* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 55.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.



confiscated buildings and, loosely interpreting its own power, rented and repaired existing buildings.<sup>18</sup> Responsibility for the daily operation of these schools rested with the Bureau, benevolent societies, and increasingly with the freedmen themselves. However, historian Meyer Weinberg contends that the Freedmen's Bureau did not intend, nor did it attempt, to create a federal public school system in the South. It simply aided in the grassroots efforts of African Americans and benevolent northern groups.<sup>19</sup> According to Lois E. Horton and James Oliver Horton, these actions were in accordance with the political and philosophical ideologies of the time that asserted any assistance given to former slaves be temporary in order to promote self-reliance.<sup>20</sup>

Government-supported institutions, however, were not the only type of rural African American southern schools. Sabbath schools, James D. Anderson found, were established long before free or public schools, and operated during the evening and weekends providing basic literary instruction. Sabbath schools, or church-sponsored schools, created an educational system that relied largely on the African American

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<sup>18</sup> Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 45.

<sup>19</sup> Meyer Weinberg, *A Chance to Learn: The History of Race and Education in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 45.

<sup>20</sup> Lois E. Horton and James Oliver Horton, "Race, Occupation, and Literacy in Reconstruction Washington, D.C.," in *Toward a New South? Studies in Post-Civil War Southern Communities*, eds. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1982), 136.

community for funding and support. Various missionary societies were also active in the South in the late nineteenth-century, and they also preferred faith-based institutions.<sup>21</sup>

Teachers black and white were among the first to heed the call to assist African Americans in their newly formed classrooms. Ronald Butchart interprets the roles of post-emancipation teachers as symbolic and physical boundary transgressors, and as facilitators of a new cultural landscape. He divides early teachers into three groups: southern white teachers, African American teachers, and northern white teachers. Southern whites, without question, obliterated preconceived notions of educational boundaries by educating blacks. Their transgression of racial boundaries, however, was not so extreme as one might assume because whites commonly taught Sunday school for slaves in the years before the Civil War.<sup>22</sup>

African American teachers eclipsed the number of white southern teachers and Yankee school marms. Most black teachers, regardless of whether they traveled from the North, were natives of the South. Many were only able to offer their students the rudiments of education. However, black teachers, northern and southern, firmly believed in a South free of traditional educational boundaries. Even their employment as teachers was a challenge to the previously established racial hierarchy. Each group's

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<sup>21</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 12-15.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald E. Butchart, "Remapping Racial Boundaries: Teachers as Border Police and Boundary Transgressors in Post-Emancipation Black Education," *Pedagogia Historica* 43, no. 1 (1988): 63.

transgressions required initiative, creativity, courage, ability and grim resolve because teachers were often targets of violent attacks, intimidation, and outright hostility.<sup>23</sup>

Though they were often detested, northern white teachers did not constitute such a serious challenge as black teachers. Nevertheless, they transgressed borders drawing from their own political and social affiliations. Northern missionaries from the American Missionary Association, Freedmen's Aid Commission, Society of Friends, United Brethren, Friend's Association of Philadelphia, and many more societies traveled south in large numbers. Many possessed the paternalistic view that blacks had been dehumanized by the brutal slave regime and were little more than victims who needed instruction in the values and rules of civil society. Teachers would later instruct their students in complex subjects such as mathematics and foreign language, but in contraband camps and ramshackle schools they began with the basics: reading and writing.<sup>24</sup>

Northerners did not share the conviction that southern blacks could support their own literacy programs. Both black and white northern missionaries struggled with the cultural differences between themselves and former slaves and wrote about their disappointment at length in personal correspondence.<sup>25</sup> In their writings, missionaries expressed doubt about the abilities of black southern teachers and mistrusted black autonomy in native schools. Some missionaries and Bureau officials felt that African

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Cornelius, "When I Can Read My Title Clear," 145.

American teachers were essentially useless. Their rudimentary knowledge could be conferred in a short time, after which they inhibited students' progress.<sup>26</sup>

Historian Jacqueline Jones illuminates the myriad jobs of teachers in *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873*. She reveals Georgia teachers' roles in organizing religious programs and establishing self-improvement groups to ease the transition between slavery and freedom. The encounter between white teachers and black students, at its most basic level, was an encounter between white and black. This relationship was not without tension. Plainly speaking, white help came with strings attached. The facts were clear. In order to receive white help, blacks had to relinquish control of their community institutions to teachers who theoretically believed in the equality of the races, but often acted with prejudice. While some refused to board or dine with freedpeople, others overcame their feelings of dislike with time. Northern teachers assumed that education would serve as a means of personal and group advancement, though they were uncertain how long this process would take. Success would manifest in signs of moral improvement and a higher standard of living among freedpeople.<sup>27</sup>

Teachers during Reconstruction were chiefly concerned with preparing African Americans to enter the political and social sphere as productive citizens. Academic training was placed second as teachers and school officials concentrated their efforts on

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<sup>26</sup> Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 3-13.

civilizing the masses through the three “R’s” and industrial education.<sup>28</sup> This practice would set the stage for an argument about the appropriate education for African Americans that would persist well into the twentieth-century. Younger students, however, were not immediately exposed to industrial education. Elementary students learned reading, writing, spelling, grammar, diction, geography, history, arithmetic, and even music. Many teachers believed diction was also highly important for black children. To “make it” in the newly formed society, African Americans needed to rid themselves of their slave dialect. In a normal school, or “teacher training program,” students were taught standard English curriculum, as well as courses in algebra, geometry, physiology, orthography, map drawing, and the practice and theory of teaching.<sup>29</sup>

By 1870, the South boasted 2,039 schools for African Americans and, according to the Freedmen’s Bureau, 65 percent of those schools were wholly or partially sustained by the monetary and manual labor contributions of freedpeople.<sup>30</sup> Early academic day schools, designed for children, operated between six and eight hours a day. However, blacks of all ages and abilities attended academic schools. Night schools created for parents and working adults often met two or three hours each evening.<sup>31</sup> School terms during the early years of African American education were often short and irregular. The

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Charles Morris, *Reading, ‘Riting, and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 173.

<sup>29</sup> Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 70.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher M. Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse: African American Education in Mississippi, 1862-1875* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 42.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, “Education of Blacks in Tennessee,” 150.

sporadic nature of schooling meant that some children did not learn to read or write until after the age of ten. Children in rural areas often walked great distances, sometimes over five miles, to attend school.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, state agents, teachers, and newspapers across the South printed glowing reports of success in the classroom.

Lack of public assistance, some white southerners maintained, was not prejudice. It simply reflected the Civil War's devastation and confiscation of property; states lacked the funds to help and most whites outright opposed public funding. In Tennessee, Paul David Phillips found that hostility proved to be a serious threat to these new schools. Whites were antagonistic about losing their labor supply and the idea of black literacy threatening their power ultimately resulted in violence against blacks. Whites intimidated and injured teachers, administrators, and students alike, and destroyed schoolhouses.<sup>33</sup>

Historians Eric Foner, Armstead L. Robinson, and Paul David Phillips emphasize how constructing schools after the Civil War helped to form strong black communities and place southern blacks at the center of Reconstruction. Robinson considers schools to be part of the institutional infrastructure that supported blacks in their transition to freedom, along with churches and benevolent societies, with little public assistance from the southern states.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Weinberg, *A Chance to Learn*, 52.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips, "Education of Blacks in Tennessee," 161.

<sup>34</sup> Armstead L. Robinson, "Plans Dat Comed From God: Institution Building and the Emergence of Black Leadership in Reconstruction Memphis," in *Toward a New South? Studies in Post-Civil War Southern Communities*, eds. Orville Vernon Burton and Robert C. McMath, Jr. (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1982), 72.

Whether public or religious, African Americans relied on their own communities to grow public education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century South. A strong, well-organized African American community that repeatedly made decisions allowing for maximum control over the education of their children characterized these early black public schools. Communities established countless numbers of schools across the South, often opting for private institutions beyond the jurisdiction of the Freedmen's Bureau and white benevolent missionary societies. Their preferences and choices reflect what historian Dorothy Granberry deems "the conscious adaptation of existing models to meet the needs of a people struggling for a place in the sun in a still hostile environment."<sup>35</sup> Such adaptations often led to tensions between missionary societies and African Americans when communities exercised their preference for black teachers, suspecting that white teachers would settle for lower standards.<sup>36</sup>

Many historians have highlighted the contributions of individual communities in the establishment of these early schools. Dorothy Granberry, for example, looks at the establishment of Brownsville School in Haywood County, Tennessee in 1868. The African American residents of Brownsville saw themselves as responsible for and fully capable of providing for their community's educational needs. Community leaders, chosen because of their good standing, encouraged these groups. Leaders were often ministers or craftsmen, relatively well-off family men, and often literate to a degree.

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<sup>35</sup> Dorothy Granberry, "Origins of an African American School in Haywood County," in *Trial and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee's African American History*, ed. Carroll Van West (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 177.

<sup>36</sup> Cornelius, "When I Can Read My Title Clear," 147.

Granberry contends that these early schools can be examined in three ways: “the form the developing school took, the basis on which [a] black community made its choices...and the community’s goals for the school.”<sup>37</sup>

Christopher Span found similar patterns among the educational efforts of African American communities in Mississippi, where, as in other areas, some whites could tolerate education for blacks if they were separate from white children. Span also emphasizes the importance of the African American community’s principles of self-help. Communities pressured their legislators and provided the financial resources and “sweat equity” for the founding and sustaining of the first schools. Community members served in schools and petitioned northern teachers to travel to Mississippi to help in the freedmen’s efforts. According to Span, freedmen’s schools were a triumph not only because they provided education, but also because they gave African Americans agency, and the skills to become self-sufficient citizens. Teachers aided blacks in becoming voters, acquiring land, negotiating labor agreements, and increasing their independence in managing their own affairs. Schools challenged the planter class by moving children from the cotton fields to the classroom.<sup>38</sup>

The exact amounts of land, labor, and money African American contributed to founding these community schools are unknown. However, their actions spoke volumes about blacks’ belief in the transformative power of education. Anderson has argued that self-help, a common practice well into the twentieth-century, was an unconscious

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<sup>37</sup> Granberry, “Origins,” 173-76.

<sup>38</sup> Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse*, 4-11.



submission to oppression.<sup>39</sup> Whether a conscious or unconscious submission, the fact remains: without community support, African American schools were unlikely to be constructed. Therefore, blacks often took matters into their own hands.

Once schools were built, it was often equally as difficult to equip them with appropriate school supplies. Even the basic struggle for African American teachers to acquire textbooks for their classrooms took place within the larger context of the battle over narratives in textbooks. Textbooks are political tools in the sense that they exude particular ways of seeing the world. Ideological wars often found their way into nineteenth and twentieth-century textbooks, and even into unsuspecting spelling and reading books.<sup>40</sup> Historian Robert C. Morris, known for his work with nineteenth-century textbooks, argues that through close examination of these schoolbooks, it is possible to ascertain what ideas reformers were trying to transmit not only in the classroom, but also in the political and social sphere.<sup>41</sup> Immediately following the Civil War, more conservative benevolent societies attempted to imbed the curriculum with educational materials designed specifically for emancipated blacks like *The Freedmen's Primer*, *The Lincoln Primer*, and *The Freedmen's Spelling Book*.<sup>42</sup>

Following the retreat of the federal government and some northern benevolent societies, decisions about the allocation of funds for education in the late nineteenth and

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<sup>39</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 184.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Self-Taught*, 130.

<sup>41</sup> Morris, *Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction*, x-xi.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 28-33.

early twentieth-century were made predominantly at the local level. Schools operated under political control and were considered a local government service.<sup>43</sup> When political realities shifted, so did the way local governments funded education. Leon F. Litwack, in poignant prose, illustrates the realities of Democrats reclaiming the control of southern statehouses: “What the white South had lost on the battlefields of the Civil War and during Reconstruction, it would largely retake in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century.”<sup>44</sup> In doing so, schools became a new means of social and political control over blacks during Jim Crow. Whites had devised a new system for perpetuating black ignorance. Ignorance, John Hope Franklin emphasizes, would make them unworthy to participate in civic life.<sup>45</sup>

As the years of hope hardened into the world of limitations in the Jim Crow era, educators shifted their interests in basic education and citizenship to industrial education. Whites always had an interest in making African Americans the laboring class. Northern philanthropists and a select group of southern whites viewed schooling for an African American laboring class as acceptable.<sup>46</sup> Philanthropists were disillusioned by white southerners’ failure to see the social and economic advantages of an industrial education for blacks. In fact, many white politicians and school superintendents were unwilling to

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<sup>43</sup> David R. James, Holly J. McCammon, and Pamela Barnhouse Walters, “Citizenship and Public Schools: Accounting for Racial Inequality in Education in the Pre- and Post-Disfranchisement South,” *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 1 (February 1997): 37.

<sup>44</sup> Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, xiv.

<sup>45</sup> Franklin, “Jim Crow Goes to School,” 234.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 80-81.

discern between industrial and academic education. Both were unfavorable.<sup>47</sup> No institutions loomed larger in the realm of industrial education than Virginia's Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute and Alabama's Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. Samuel L. Chapman in Virginia and his protégé Booker T. Washington in Alabama instructed their students not only in industrial education (which many felt was education for servitude), but also in dress, demeanor, gentility, and all social graces prized in late nineteenth-century society.<sup>48</sup>

Leon F. Litwack found that whites were often of two minds about educating an African American laboring class. Some felt that African Americans should be educated in order to properly indoctrinate them with moral and religious values. Some thought them to be mentally inferior. Many feared that educating African Americans would make them discontented, resentful, and dangerous.<sup>49</sup> In a response to an article Andrew Carnegie wrote in 1910 in favor of African American education, one Virginian burst forth with seemingly unassailable logic regarding educating African Americans. Once they achieved a "smattering of education," the writer argued, they would soon aspire to land ownership and public office. Blacks would undoubtedly resort to violence to achieve these objectives, creating a problem to be "crimsoned with more blood than was required to break the bonds of slavery."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>48</sup> Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 81.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 207.

However, for many African Americans coming of age during Jim Crow, education was only a small part of their lives, if it was a part at all. This was not so much a rejection of education as the economic need for them to enter the work force. To this end, some parents did not encourage their children to attend school because academics failed to help rural children address the challenges of their daily lives. To move beyond elementary education was to aspire to a life away from agricultural labor. Thus, the average student at the turn of the century dropped out of school after the fifth or sixth grade.<sup>51</sup>

Twentieth-century reformers working in rural southern communities strove to change this state of education and the state of African American communities. Reformers were of the mind that education could solve the pressing problems facing the South. As easily controlled places of learning, schools could instruct students in the social, economic, and political values thought to be disappearing in the United States. Beyond literacy and numeracy skills, schools could instruct students on how to live properly. Progressive activists believed that southern schools were stunted because of political turmoil and general indifference of southern communities. Not only did southern schools have one-half to one-third of the funding of other public schools across the nation, students also attended school less often, an average of 70 days per year rather than 100 or 130 days per year. Despite general improvements in literacy rates, southerners still

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

boasted the highest ratio of illiteracy, 20 percent, in 1900.<sup>52</sup> Historian Mary S. Hoffschwelle has written extensively on the reform movement in Tennessee. Through her research of Tennessee communities, she underlines reformers' fundamental belief that changing the rural South's physical and social environment was essential to improving living and working conditions.<sup>53</sup>

Improving school architecture was at the forefront of reformers' agendas. In the absence of an officially designated school building, school might be held in any number of locations including stables, warehouses, storerooms, and plantation cotton houses. More frequently, however, African Americans held schools in their churches. Congregations often held the belief that support of local schools was a vital part of their Christian duty.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, many African American schools bore similar names to those of their denominational counterparts. Litwack found that few African American students forgot what it was like to receive an education in primitive, ramshackle one-room structures with unsteady floors and cracks in the roof. Students sat on makeshift uncomfortable benches made from split logs. Light entered the room from small, often glassless windows. Classrooms might be furnished with blackboards, but teachers provided their own chalk and erasers. Classroom furniture was often a miscellaneous

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<sup>52</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1900-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 13-15.

<sup>53</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, "Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1914-1929" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1993), 13.

<sup>54</sup> David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 60-62.

collection acquired from local dumps or trash piles. The effects of schools constructed through community labor were evident: ill-fitting clapboards, odd angles, leaning walls, cracked ceilings and plaster, and broken or missing glass panes.<sup>55</sup>

Southern parents did express their reluctance at turning their children over to outside reformers, abandoning the institutions communities had labored to build; but, new and improved schools would need specialized environments including workshops, laboratories, auditoriums, gardens, and playgrounds. Reformers wanted the new school environment to be simplistic, orderly, and bright to set proper aesthetics and health standards for students.<sup>56</sup> Fletcher B. Dresslar, professor of health education at the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, recognized the complex issues in designing schoolhouses because of the growing need to use schoolhouses for a plethora of social activities. He often emphasized the correlation between student health and building conditions in his speeches and publications. In addition to advocating for improved drinking water and toilet facilities, Dresslar was also very adamant about providing proper lighting for students in order to protect their eyesight. He particularly disliked single flooring because it made for dirty and drafty classrooms, creating illness in its difficulty to clean and inability to keep out the cold during the winter. Double flooring, Dresslar argued, would keep students warmer. Adjustable windows would allow for

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<sup>55</sup> Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> Hoffschwelle, "Rebuilding," 23-24.

increased air circulation during the summer months and lowering classroom temperatures.<sup>57</sup>

According to historian William Cutler, III, schoolhouses are fully tied to educational theory and are active participants in a student's learning process. Once there was a reliable system of mass education, good school design became imperative. For Cutler, the movement to construct better schoolhouses was a direct result of the depressing and unhealthy state of many public schools, and the complaints of educators like Fletcher Dresslar about the faults of schoolhouse construction, maintenance, and location.<sup>58</sup> As a valued part of the learning process, the idea of a schoolhouse "can be understood as a manifestation of the common practice of giving tangible form to such abstractions as status, values, and ideals."<sup>59</sup>

Thus, reformers leapt into action using the public school as their point of entry into rural communities. School buildings emulated life lessons, taught by a teacher to their students who would then pass on that knowledge to their parents.<sup>60</sup> The African American family at home had remained considerably strong since the nineteenth-century. Often, all family members were engaged in some type of study, with recently educated black children acting as teachers to their elders. These private and personal acts nurtured

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>58</sup> William W. Cutler, III, "Cathedral of Culture: The Schoolhouse in American Educational Thought and Practice Since 1820," *History of Education Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 6-7.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>60</sup> Hoffschwelle, *Rebuilding*, 7.

the familial bond established during the time of slavery.<sup>61</sup> Hoffschwelle argues that community bonds played an important role in determining which elements of reform African Americans embraced and to what extent. In her own words: “They chose if, when, and how they would participate in outsiders’ programs, according to their own needs and aspirations. Rebuilding schools, homes, and communities...began and ended with the people inside them.”<sup>62</sup>

In 1902, John D. Rockefeller and Frederick T. Gates founded the General Education Board (GEB). The GEB’s mission primarily supported higher education and medical schools, but it also financially assisted rural white and black schools in the South. Though the GEB historically neglected black schools (only allocating \$2.4 million to black education between 1902 and 1918, less than a tenth of what it allocated to white schools), it made a significant gesture toward supporting African American education when it decided to pay southern states to create the new position of state-agent to negro rural schools. These agents promoted the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education.<sup>63</sup>

The GEB worked in tandem with the Anna T. Jeanes Foundation. The Jeanes Foundation was one of the most prominent groups that fully realized teachers as agents of rural improvement. The Jeanes Fund, established in 1907, was the first foundation dedicated solely to African American schools. Jeanes supervisors and teachers played a

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<sup>61</sup> Span, *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse*, 30.

<sup>62</sup> Hoffschwelle, *Rebuilding*, 149.

<sup>63</sup> Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, 248.



large role in promoting issues of health, school building, fundraising, and better teaching practices. Like similar white associations, Jeanees teachers organized parents to help with school improvements. Unlike white associations, they did not lobby local and county governments to increase funding for such projects. Many Jeanees teachers gained organizational skills by participating in churches and various societies, giving them a special claim to leadership. Gender roles were less unequal in black communities making it easier for women to assume positions of leadership. African American female teachers in general could also take advantage of lingering white paternalism in the South, capitalizing on their “Mammie” caricatures that made white males more comfortable with black female assertiveness.<sup>64</sup> With the help of state agents and Jeanees teachers, African American schools gained advocates within an adversarial system both hostile and indifferent to black education.<sup>65</sup>

One of the most influential reform programs for African American schools was the Rosenwald school-building program. In 1912, Booker T. Washington approached Tuskegee trustee Julius Rosenwald of Sears, Roebuck, and Co. about investing in a pilot program to construct six schools in Macon County, Alabama. The program’s self-help requirement meant that the African American community was an indispensable part of the Rosenwald program. Samuel L. Smith, a progressive who began working for the Rosenwald Fund in 1920, believed that schools built through self-help would help sustain the networks of African American communities, their connection to the countryside, and

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<sup>64</sup> Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, 224-45; Hoffschwelle, *Rosenwald Schools of the American South*, 20-22.

<sup>65</sup> Hoffschwelle, “Rebuilding,” 66.

their connection to rural whites. Such was not the case. Self-help, as established in the nineteenth-century, was still a necessity if African Americans wanted to send their children to learn in decent schoolhouses.<sup>66</sup>

The historic grassroots approach and dedication to student success is prevalent throughout the history of the Rosenwald school-building program. The successful experiment in Macon County would be the precursor to the building program that awarded matching grants, or challenge grants, for public school construction. The grants distributed by the Fund required recipients to meet standards, including standard lot size, standard school term, new blackboards, new desks, and privies for students and teachers. African American communities had to make cash or in-kind contributions of materials or labor in order to be eligible for a Fund grant. Most went above and beyond such a call initiating building campaigns, lobbying education officials, and often building the schools themselves.<sup>67</sup> Rosenwald schools, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, stood as a physical representation of a community's commitment to advancement and their desire for a better educational environment for their children.

Hoffschwelle also details the design elements of Rosenwald schools that were meant to create a better learning environment for African American children, and also makes them distinct on the southern landscape. The Rosenwald Fund's *Community School Plans*, largely the work of former Fletcher Dresslar student Samuel L. Smith, placed windows on the western side of the classroom to provide light. Breeze windows

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<sup>66</sup> Hoffschwelle, *Rebuilding*, 88.

<sup>67</sup> Hoffschwelle, *Rosenwald Schools*, 51.

were set high on the opposite wall to allow for cross ventilation. Color schemes received similar attention with dual-tone horizontal paint schemes intended to intensify natural light, yet minimize the glare on student desks.<sup>68</sup>

The impending Great Depression and the Fund's change in philanthropic direction led to a termination of the school-building program in 1932. By this time, though, one in every five African American schools in fifteen states across the South was a Rosenwald school. Many remained in operation until desegregation, and hundreds survive today.<sup>69</sup> Coupled with African American principles of self-help, the Rosenwald school-building program afforded African American children new educational environments while challenging the predisposed ideas of what types of schoolhouses were befitting for each race. With more than five thousand constructed across the region, Rosenwald schools were embedded in African American community identity as symbols of uplift and progress, and subverted the material culture of Jim Crow.

As historian Vanessa Siddle Walker affirms, the expectation of self-help was so ingrained in the African American community by the time of the Rosenwald school-building program that blacks frequently made offers to provide materials and labor in support of a new school.<sup>70</sup> Parents and teachers were joined in their self-sacrificing concerns by principals who put student success at the center of their careers. These

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 54-64.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>70</sup> Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 21.

educators, however, faced numerous challenges. They received little money from school boards, struggled to keep students in the classroom, strove to improve students' grades, and endeavored to increase the number of students who attended college. In the face of these hardships, they created a system of education that emphasized the relationship between teachers and students. Teachers promoted a system that saw daily activities as a means for allowing their students' talents to flourish. Above all, teachers and principals believed in their students' abilities to learn and grow. Walker argues that these facts are evident when scholars examine the institutional structures principals and teachers created and the additional responsibilities they assumed in the communities they served.<sup>71</sup>

By 1932, African Americans had contributed 17 percent of the funds to build five thousand schools across the South, not including "sweat equity."<sup>72</sup> In the early twentieth-century, the majority of funds for southern schools were still raised locally, forcing impoverished communities to support black schools both financially and otherwise. The Great Depression forced poor agricultural communities further into destitution. While the decline of the cotton economy and the enactment of state laws extending the school year did lead to an increase in school enrollments, demands of an agricultural lifestyle and family responsibilities still resulted in widespread absenteeism during the school year.<sup>73</sup>

Disparities in pupil expenditures also became troublesome. By 1951, black children in rural areas received only 62 percent of white allocations in seven southern

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 200-1.

<sup>72</sup> Walker, "Valued Segregated Schools," 258.

<sup>73</sup> Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, 299.

states. However, between 1940 and 1952, the value of black school buildings rose, reducing the black-white disparity to slightly more than one-half, rather than four-fifths.<sup>74</sup> The rise in value of black school buildings coincides with the era of “equalization” of black schools when whites were facing the imminent threat of federally enforced desegregation. It was such misallocation of resources and the principle of legal segregation on white terms that vexed black southerners. Racial “separateness” was acceptable because African Americans “liked the sense of community and solidarity that segregated schools fostered.”<sup>75</sup> Between the 1930s and 1960s, African American parents continued to contribute to segregated schools in a number of ways. They are documented as purchasing books, pianos, lumber, labor, science equipment, playground equipment, grass seed, school busses, and all manner of items to beautify school grounds and maintain their community institutions. Perhaps the ultimate sacrifice parents made was sending their children to school and therefore sacrificing the family’s number of laborers and financial stability.<sup>76</sup>

The struggle to attain black public high schools in the South was also common during the twentieth-century. Whereas most American youths were being ushered into high school classrooms, southern black youths were repeatedly finding doors slammed in their faces. Discrimination against African Americans students during a critical transformation of American secondary education jeopardized the long-term growth of

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<sup>74</sup> Weinberg, *A Chance to Learn*, 84.

<sup>75</sup> Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Walker, “Valued Segregated Schools,” 271-72.

education in the African American community. According to Anderson, this was one of the most troubling reasons that African Americans lagged far behind other Americans' educational progress.<sup>77</sup>

As in the nineteenth-century, teachers in twentieth-century segregated schools were revered for their high expectations, dedication, and demanding teaching style. Black teachers, often products of segregated schools themselves, understood the importance of preparing their students to negotiate the segregated world having lived the benefits of education themselves. They were professional, grounded in understandings of classroom pedagogy, and deeply committed to student development and achievement.<sup>78</sup> Adam Fairclough has written extensively about the role of teachers in the classroom and in the African American community in the twentieth-century. For nearly a century, African American teachers instructed the overwhelming majority of black children in segregated schools. Black teachers not only inspired and motivated their pupils; they also nourished racial pride as the backbone of the middle class and important sources of black leadership. Their struggles seemed endless, trying to sustain schools, retain patrons, procure supplies, secure a consistent income, and minimize white hostility while cultivating white support.<sup>79</sup>

Zoe Burkholder has examined the role of twentieth-century teachers as agents of social change in *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900-*

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<sup>77</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 236-37.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-66.

<sup>79</sup> Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, 5-10.

1954. Twentieth-century discussions of race found their way into the classroom, and teachers found themselves grappling with ways to educate their students about the subject. Teachers taught race in three ways: race as nation, race as color, and race as culture. Burkholder argues that anthropologists worked in tandem with teachers' associations to eradicate racism from the classroom using new studies published like *The Races of Mankind* (1943). This study allowed for an anthropological foundation from which teachers could promote racial tolerance and race as a social construct. Intercultural textbooks and social scientists urged teachers to emphasize culture and downplay race. This focus made it possible for teachers to highlight the "cultural gifts" of racial minorities. Anthropological activism and new classroom pedagogy coincided with the World War II era that demanded "tolerance" be a marker of an educated citizen.<sup>80</sup>

Using desegregation as a lens, Sonya Ramsey examines a century of African American teachers in Nashville, Tennessee, and the relationships between class, race, and gender in an urban southern city. Relying on oral history interviews, Ramsey charts how black teachers formed identity and records their actions in the classroom through cycles of resistance and accommodation. Though many of Nashville's black teachers were college-educated, they were still considered inferior in education and skills. They combatted this white perception by working diligently to elevate their level of work and combat derogatory stereotypes. Ramsey found that while black teachers did not teach racial confrontation, they did teach lessons about equality and freedom in messages of empowerment and self-confidence. After desegregation, African American teachers

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<sup>80</sup> Zoe Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900-1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

repackaged this message of racial uplift to fit integrated classrooms. They worked to “form alliances across racial lines, constructing new identities as racial and class mediators, and protecting African American children.”<sup>81</sup>

African American activism in support of segregated schools speaks to the quality that educators, parents, and students fostered in black institutions despite their shortcomings in funds and buildings. Historians like David Cecelski have taken note of this activism and have channeled that into their scholarship. While certainly in need of resources and fighting against white leaders to mold African American students into second-class citizens, segregated schools created opportunities to nourish mind, body, and soul, complementing the life lessons students received from the church, family, and larger black community. Cecelski and other historians argue that the black schools functioned as an extension of the family, “a daily shelter for black children to learn in one with high expectations, strong role models, and constant reinforcement of their dignity and self respect.”<sup>82</sup>

Wali R. Kharif also contributes to Cecelski’s argument with his scholarship on Darwin School in Cookeville, Tennessee, during the mid-twentieth-century. Kharif emphasized that schools like Darwin School were important and respected, even if they were underfunded. Darwin School afforded outlets for community service and socialization within a protected space. In general, the black public high school, along

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<sup>81</sup> Sonya Ramsey, *Reading, Writing, and Segregation: A Century of Black Women Teachers in Nashville* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 117-18.

<sup>82</sup> Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road*, 34-35.



with the church, was one of the only institutions solely controlled, operated, staffed, populated, and maintained by African Americans.<sup>83</sup>

Carter Julian Savage furthers this conversation in his dissertation “From Claiborne’s Institute to Natchez High School: The History of African American Education in Williamson County, Tennessee, 1890-1967.” Savage found that schools created in small, close-knit communities like those in Franklin, Tennessee, had a positive effect on improving school attendance and community participation. The agency they exerted over their schools manifested in four ways: resource development, community leadership, extraordinary service on the part of principals and teachers, and the centrality of the school in the community. These schools and their supporting communities “provide an opportunity to analyze the agency of southern African Americans in their school development processes.”<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, scholars and African American communities have successfully challenged the notion that segregation-era schools were in every way inferior. Common themes and characteristics of the valued segregated school, as remembered by those who attended them, include exemplary teachers, parental support, leadership of the school principal, rigorous curriculum, and extracurricular activities. These new studies call for a deeper understanding of black schools by providing a closer look at the education and life-

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<sup>83</sup> Wali R. Kharif, “Darwin School and Black Public Education: Cookeville in the Decade of the Brown Decision,” in *Trial and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee’s African American History*, ed. Carroll Van West (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 352.

<sup>84</sup> Carter Julian Savage, “From Claiborne’s Institute to Natchez High School: The History of African American Education in Williamson County, Tennessee, 1890-1967” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1998), 8.

lessons children received in segregated settings.<sup>85</sup> Uncritical celebration of these segregated schools, however, paints a picture of a golden era of community and stability in African American history that never really existed. Scholars cannot be blind to the failings and shortcomings of a racially segregated system, but they can celebrate African American success within a system of oppression.

Despite the emergence of Jim Crow after Reconstruction and an equally racist educational system in the twentieth-century, education remained a stalwart against white supremacy. The remaining extant African American schools in rural communities cannot be underestimated in their value to yield new information, and neither can the communities that surround them. History may confirm a lack of resources, but emerging studies of African American communities necessitate a deeper understanding of the segregated school as a unique environment of racial uplift and community identity. What is clear is that African American schools taught much more and meant much more to communities than the three “R’s.” These sentiments are clearly demonstrated in the histories and preservation of Gibson County’s Mt. Zion Negro School, Polk-Clark School, Trenton Rosenwald School, and Sitka School.

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<sup>85</sup> Walker, “Valued Segregated Schools,” 277.

## CHAPTER II

## AN OVERVIEW OF SEGREGATED EDUCATION IN TENNESSEE

“And we are told all men are now free Freemen! Oh god, how blind are mortals!”<sup>1</sup>  
 –W.H. Stilwell

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court announced its doctrine of “separate but equal” in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Tennessee, however, had already been pursuing its own segregation policies for over a decade.<sup>2</sup> Tennessee law had mandated segregation in public education since 1867, and by the state constitution of 1870. Later disfranchisement laws ensured that African Americans would not have the political power to challenge segregation.<sup>3</sup> African American education, like their right to vote, would also be met with white resistance in Tennessee. Nineteenth and twentieth-century African American schools in Tennessee operated within the discriminatory practices of segregation, commonly called Jim Crow. Within the public school’s system of oppression and limitations, African American citizens established an educational culture, one that reflected community standards and expectations. This chapter looks at the development of Tennessee’s public school system, as well as the history of segregated education in Tennessee and Gibson County.

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<sup>1</sup> “Stilwell, W.H. in Humboldt, Tennessee to Eaton, John,” 6 April 1870, John J. Eaton Jr. Papers, 1865-1881. Tennessee Electronic Library, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

<sup>2</sup> “School Desegregation in Tennessee: 12 Districts Released from Desegregation Orders; 17 Districts Remain Under Court Jurisdiction,” Tennessee Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (April 2008), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Connie L. Lester, “Disfranchising Laws,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=380> (2015).

Tennessee's first constitution, written in 1796, had no provisions for public education. The Cession Act of 1806 was Tennessee's first official recognition of public education, segregated or otherwise. The Cession Act stated that Tennessee had to furnish one hundred thousand acres of land for the construction of two universities. It further stated Tennessee would reserve an additional one hundred thousand acres for the establishment of academies in each county. As a result of the Cession Act, the Tennessee General Assembly established academies in each of Tennessee's existing twenty-seven counties.<sup>4</sup>

In 1827, the Assembly worked to establish a common school fund from the remainder of the lands granted by the Cession Act. The legislature also added other financial resources including capital and interest from the new state bank, stock in the old bank in Knoxville, vacant and un-appropriated lands within the state, private donations to education, un-appropriated escheats and future escheats, and properties of Tennessee citizens who died without heirs. However, none of these revenue sources generated enough money to maintain a statewide system of public schools. In 1829, the legislature passed an act to "establish a system of common schools and to appropriate the school funds of this State," which created an agency to organize the administration of public lands and to collect money owed to the state; yet, it did nothing to provide a semblance of centralized authority over the school system.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Griggs Fleming, "Elementary and Secondary Education," *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <http://www.tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=428> (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Charles William Dabney, *Universal Education in the South, Volume I* (New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1969), 290.

Tennessee's 1835 constitution declared education as essential to the state's democratic institutions. In addition, it recommended the establishment of a board of commissioners to administer funding for the state's public schools. In 1836, the legislature enacted a law with the intent to centralize administration of state schools, a system that had previously been unorganized at best. The law provided for a state superintendent for public instruction, the first of whom elected was Robert H. McEwen. While there was growing concern for the inadequate state of education in Tennessee throughout the mid-nineteenth-century, such discussions were postponed with the approach of the Civil War.<sup>6</sup>

After the Civil War, public education did not escape the state's drive to segregate the races. In 1867, the Republican-controlled legislature voted to open public schools to children of all races, but stipulated black and white children were to be taught in separate facilities.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this act provided for centralized authority, a superintendent of schools to be elected every two years by popular vote, and a board of education in each civil district that would elect a county superintendent to serve for a three-year period.<sup>8</sup> In 1869, the Assembly amended the state constitution under Article XI to bar racial integration in all schools in the state. While it did grant all citizens the right to attend the

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<sup>6</sup> Fleming, "Elementary and Secondary Education."

<sup>7</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, "Public Education in Tennessee," *Trials and Triumphs: Tennesseans' Search for Citizenship, Community, and Opportunity*, <http://library.mtsu.edu/trials/hoffschwelle.php> (2014).

<sup>8</sup> Dabney, *Universal Education in the South, Vol. I*, 296.

University of Tennessee in Knoxville, the law mandated the university provide separate instructional facilities for white and black students.<sup>9</sup>

Under these new laws, Dr. W.H. Stilwell became Gibson County's first superintendent of education (1867-1870).<sup>10</sup> Stilwell's correspondence with General John Eaton (a well-known champion of public education in Tennessee) throughout his tenure as superintendent paints a picture of Gibson County, like many other Tennessee counties at the time, in political and social upheaval. He frequently reported on the dismal state of the county and its public schools. He once lamented, "Many of our people have lost confidence in the school law, and indeed, in the State itself."<sup>11</sup>

He also wrote of the persecution of African American schools by the Ku Klux Klan and was particularly devastated by the outcome of the 1870 election when southern Democrats reclaimed political victory: "I voted for good men, but in vain. All is lost!"<sup>12</sup> His successors throughout segregated education include A.S. Currey (1870-1875), J.M. Coulter (1875-1880), James R. Deason (1880-1885), A. Killough (1885-1887), John C. Wright (1887-1889), A. Killough (1889-1891), J.M. Baker (1891-1895), Flora Fitzgerald

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<sup>9</sup> Fleming, "Elementary and Secondary Education."

<sup>10</sup> Frederick M. Culp and Mrs. Robert E. Ross, *Gibson County Past and Present: The First General History of One of Tennessee's Pivotal Counties* (Trenton: Gibson County Historical Society, 1961), 281-83.

<sup>11</sup> "Letter to Gen. Eaton from W.H. Stilwell, April 19, 1869," John J. Eaton Jr. Papers, 1865-1881. Tennessee Electronic Library, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

<sup>12</sup> "W.H. Stilwell in Humboldt, TN to Gen. John Eaton in Washington, D.C.," March 28, 1870, John Eaton Correspondence. Tennessee Electronic Library, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

(1895-1899), J.B. Cummings (1899-1917), F.L. Browning (1917-1930), Irby H. Koffman (1930-1934), A.R. Dixon (1934-1939), and C.H. Cole (1939-?).<sup>13</sup>

After the 1870 election, the new state legislature repealed all progressive legislation passed between 1867 and 1868. Decisions about public education were placed back into the hands of local county and district authorities. The legislature argued that the extreme poverty of many citizens in Tennessee did not warrant the taxes levied for public education. All state taxes on property for public education were repealed and only a fifty-cent poll tax remained.<sup>14</sup> The Tennessee General Assembly again passed a law in 1870 to implement a provision of the constitution that mandated schools for black and white children were to be kept separate.<sup>15</sup> In 1885, state legislators passed a statute providing for the establishment of graded high schools. The law gave municipal corporations the power to levy additional taxes and build high schools. In 1899, Tennessee law required the establishment of a high school in each county. To pay for high schools, the Assembly empowered county courts to levy special taxes. The legislature also asserted that these high schools would not have access to the regular fund appropriated to the districts.<sup>16</sup>

Tennessee's public school systems developed slowly up to the twentieth-century. Financial depression and opposition to taxes retarded growth, as well as prejudice,

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<sup>13</sup> Culp and Ross, *Gibson County*, 281.

<sup>14</sup> Dabney, *Universal Education in the South, Vol. I*, 301.

<sup>15</sup> "School Desegregation," 2.

<sup>16</sup> Fleming, "Elementary and Secondary Education."

politics, and indifference.<sup>17</sup> At the turn of the twentieth-century, approximately 67 percent of 293,848 white males between the ages of six and twenty-one were enrolled in school. The same percentage was true for the 279,439 white females between the ages of six and twenty-one. However, only 50 percent of the 97,474 black males between the ages of six and twenty-one were enrolled in school and 52 percent of the 98,082 black females of the same ages were enrolled in school. In the 1900-1901 school year and throughout the first half of the twentieth-century, the highest numbers of black and white pupils enrolled were in the first grade. Enrollment rates steadily declined with every higher grade as older children were more frequently called into the work force. In the same school year, students were only in class an average of ninety-six days.<sup>18</sup> The Tennessee General Assembly passed a law in 1901 that made educating students in an integrated school punishable by imprisonment and or flat fine of \$50.<sup>19</sup>

Public education reformer Charles William Dabney asserted that the dismal state of education in Tennessee persisted until 1902, “when, through the influence of the Peabody College and the Southern Education Board working through the University of Tennessee, a revival set in.”<sup>20</sup> In 1902, the University of Tennessee established a Department of Education with Dr. Philander P. Claxton, the “Crusader for Public

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<sup>17</sup> Dabney, *Universal Education in the South, Vol. I.*, 303.

<sup>18</sup> Tennessee Department of Public Instruction, *Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1901* (Nashville, Tennessee), 40.

<sup>19</sup> “School Desegregation,” 2.

<sup>20</sup> Dabney, *Universal Education in the South, Vol. I.*, 305.



Education in the South,” as its head. The following year, on the recommendation of Governor James B. Frazier, the legislature appropriated the first money from the state for public education outside the interest of the school fund or funds meant to compensate for money “lost” during the Civil War.<sup>21</sup>

Claxton, along with R.L. Jones, S.G. Gilbreath, Seymour Mynders, J.W. Brister, and P.L. Harned, led the campaign for state financial support for Tennessee’s public school system, resulting in the passage of the General Education Act.<sup>22</sup> The General Education Act of 1909 reserved one quarter of the state’s budget for the purposes of education, 61 percent of which was to be allocated based on scholastic population. The remaining 39 percent was for a variety of purposes: an “equalization” fund designed to equalize the length of school term regardless of tax revenue; county high schools and libraries; the University of Tennessee; and to the establishment of four “normal schools.”<sup>23</sup>

While the legislators allocated money to county and city school boards of education on the basis of scholastic population, there were no requirements that the school boards divide the money fairly between white and black schools. Tennessee legislators took a progressive step toward education, in general, when they passed a

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<sup>21</sup> Charles William Dabney, *Universal Education in the South, Volume II* (New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1969), 361-363.

<sup>22</sup> Clinton B. Allison, “Philander Priestley Claxton,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=271> (2015).

<sup>23</sup> Hoffschwelle, “Public Education in Tennessee.”

compulsory attendance law in 1913 that required all children between the ages of eight and fourteen to attend school for at least eighty days per year.<sup>24</sup>

Another source of support for public education came from private foundations. Numerous reform agencies and groups were at work in Tennessee to improve education in the early twentieth-century like the Peabody Education Fund (established in 1867) and the Southern Education Board (established in 1901). In fact, the Peabody Education Fund contributed \$844,396.65 between 1868 and 1913 in Tennessee and was much involved in stabilizing the public school system in Tennessee.<sup>25</sup> In 1914, however, the Southern Education Board and Peabody Education Fund relinquished responsibility for rural schools to the General Education Board (established in 1902). After that reorganization, Tennessee's Department of Education paid the salaries of two rural school agents, one for white schools and one for black schools, with General Education Board funds.<sup>26</sup> During this period and through World War I, Tennessee struggled to install, defend, and expand the state's system of public education. World War I also shifted the public's attention away from education and on to matters of internal improvement crucial to national defense.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Andrew David Holt, *The Struggle for a State System of Public Schools in Tennessee, 1903-1936* (Kingsport Press, Inc., 1938), 32.

<sup>26</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, "Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1914-1929" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1993), 87.

<sup>27</sup> Holt, *The Struggle*, 297.

The Anna T. Jeanes Foundation was among the most notable groups hard at work throughout Tennessee and Gibson County during the first half of the twentieth-century. A variety of sources paid Jeanes supervisors' and teachers' salaries, like Shellie T. Northcutt's salary in Gibson County, including the Jeanes Fund, county funds, city funds, state funds, or federal funds. In 1927, for example, Northcutt was paid \$70 from the Jeanes Fund, \$20 from the county, and \$35 from the state to comprise her monthly salary.<sup>28</sup>

By 1940, twenty-five Jeanes teachers were employed in twenty-nine Tennessee counties. They taught in 702 schools that employed 1,313 teachers. Supervisors made 5,627 school visits and 4,012 home visits. In the 1940-1941 school year, Jeanes teachers helped raise \$12,579.00 for new school buildings, \$11,126.82 for school equipment, \$3,081.26 for schoolhouse repair, \$2,443.30 for libraries, and \$6,306.89 for miscellaneous purposes.<sup>29</sup> Prior to Carrie Booker Seat's employment in 1940, Gibson County lacked a Jeanes supervisor for nearly a decade. Upon her arrival, dental inspections, x-rays, and blood tests were given to all African American students in the

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<sup>28</sup> "Jeanes Teachers," Tennessee Department of Education Commissioner's Reports, 1913-1970, Record Group 92, Roll 81, Series V. Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>29</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, *Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1941* (Nashville, Tennessee), 53.

county. Results showed that many black children had poor dental health and were, in general, deficient in reading.<sup>30</sup>

The Rosenwald school building program was also very active in Tennessee, contributing \$214,700 between 1914 and 1927 for the construction of schools for black children. Cash and in-kind contributions from black Tennesseans totaled \$242,298 while public funds contributed \$890,520 in tax dollars.<sup>31</sup> The Slater Fund also worked during this period to establish county “training schools,” promoting industrial education for black students. By the 1920s, these schools had evolved into full-fledged academic institutions.<sup>32</sup> In 1927, as the Rosenwald Fund was winding down, Commissioner of Education Perry L. Harned and Governor Henry Horton convinced the Tennessee legislature to appropriate one million dollars of tobacco tax funds to rural school building programs during the next five years. This sparked the construction of rural schools throughout Tennessee during the 1927-1928 and 1928-1929 scholastic years and added to earlier construction initiatives like staid aid for consolidation. The rural schoolhouse movement, as the construction initiative came to be known, largely ignored the needs of black schools and when aid did come, it came on white terms that made few demands of

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<sup>30</sup> “Jeanes Conference 1940,” Tennessee Department of Education Commissioner’s Reports, 1913-1970, Record Group 92, Roll 81, Series V. Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>31</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Fleming, “Elementary and Secondary Education.”

whites. It promoted industrial education and relied heavily on African American community initiative and self-help.<sup>33</sup>

Between 1927 and 1929, public funds helped to build 450 new rural schools. By 1929, there were 617 white high schools in Tennessee county school systems, but only 47 black high schools throughout the state. Only 335 white high schools offered four-year programs and less than half of black high schools offered four-year programs. Clearly, educational opportunities at the high school level were slim, at best, for African American students. The overall value of school facilities totaled \$11.6 million, but black county high school property comprised a disparate \$261,000 of those millions. However, twelve state-approved two-year high schools and eighteen state-approved four-year high schools were built between 1915 and 1930 for black students, expanding opportunities. The twelve two-year schools made up 92 percent of the two-year schools for blacks in 1930 and 78 percent of the four-year schools for blacks. Most schools were of brick construction, and the overwhelming majority of four-year schools had ten or fewer classrooms while 83 percent of two-year schools had eight or fewer classrooms.<sup>34</sup>

While tax revenues for education rose during the 1920s, they experienced a sharp decline in the 1930s as Tennessee experienced the brutal force of the Great Depression. In response to the economic downturn, Congress and President Franklin D. Roosevelt enacted a series of domestic programs known as the New Deal. The most important New

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<sup>33</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1900-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 22-27.

<sup>34</sup> Hoffschwelle, "Rebuilding," 93-105.

Deal agencies for education were the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the National Youth Administration (NYA). These agencies funneled federal money into Tennessee's public education. Between 1933 and 1939, the PWA constructed 70 percent of all educational buildings in the United States and spent \$6 billion to do it. In Tennessee, the PWA spent \$7.4 million to provide new school facilities for over 75,000 students between 1933 and 1935 alone.<sup>35</sup> The growing opposition to the New Deal and approach of World War II in the late 1930s led to a shift in federal spending from civilian to military projects. By the time the agency was terminated in 1941, the PWA had sponsored more than six hundred projects with federal and local governments spending \$90 million in providing construction and wages for Tennessee citizens.<sup>36</sup>

The Works Progress Administration, established in 1935, outlived the PWA until 1943. Constructing new schools across the country was one of the WPA's highest priorities. By 1938, the agency had constructed 123 new schools and renovated 480 schools throughout Tennessee.<sup>37</sup> The WPA also sponsored adult education classes, public health services, and school lunch programs that hired Tennessee teachers, nurses, and dietitians. In larger cities, the WPA offered sewing and canning classes at domestic training centers. They also hired actors, artists, musicians, and writers for their arts

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<sup>35</sup> Carroll Van West, *Tennessee's New Deal Landscape: A Guidebook* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 96.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas H. Coode, "Public Works Administration," *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1086> (2015).

<sup>37</sup> West, *New Deal Landscape*, 97.

program. The National Youth Administration, another important school-building agency often not recognized, offered part time jobs and vocational classes to full-time students. In fact, NYA youth constructed shops and vocational buildings in twenty-three Tennessee counties and recreational buildings in another thirteen. Due to political scandal and the onset of World War II, Congress terminated the agency on June 30, 1943.<sup>38</sup>

At the outset of World War II, average expenditures per pupil had risen to \$45.25 as war efforts on the home front generated a new source of funding for public education in Tennessee.<sup>39</sup> By May 1942, the Federal Works Agency had allocated over \$2 million for new school construction, as well as operational costs for areas surrounding plants and military sites. Establishment of the Milan Army Ammunition Plant in 1941 significantly enhanced the federal presence in Gibson County. In Milan, the location of Polk-Clark School, federal dollars paid for the construction of two new elementary schools and one new high school for whites, and a structural addition to Polk-Clark School (then Gibson County Training School).<sup>40</sup>

Throughout the twentieth-century, educational environments for African American students in Tennessee and in Gibson County were fluid, representing the various forces at work in black public education. In 1900, before the establishment of many reform groups, there were 4,610 black children between the ages and six and twenty-one in Gibson County. Of that number 2,606 children were enrolled in school.

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas H. Coode, “Works Progress Administration,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1534> (2015).

<sup>39</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, *Annual Statistical Report 1941*, 25-28.

<sup>40</sup> Hoffschwelle, “Public Education in Tennessee.”

The school year averaged 199 days and the estimated value of schoolhouses, grounds, etc. was assessed at \$101,800 by the Department of Education.<sup>41</sup> In 1910, the number of black children between the ages of six and twenty-one decreased to 3,693. This dramatic decrease can be attributed to the beginning stages of the Great Migration, when African Americans migrated in large numbers from the rural South to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West. Enrollment of African American students, however, increased to 62 percent (up from 57 percent in 1900). Estimated value of school property increased to \$175,000. The average number of days taught in county schools decreased to 112 days, but increased in city schools to 148 days.<sup>42</sup>

In 1920, there were 3,583 black children between the ages of six and twenty-one in Gibson County, and estimated value of school property rose again to \$209,025. Average length of school term increased in county schools and city schools to 131 and 174.<sup>43</sup> In 1930, school enrollment continued to rise as 2,615 black children out of 3,463 children (76 percent) between the ages of five and nineteen were enrolled in school.<sup>44</sup> Average length of school term for county elementary schools numbered 99 and 176 for

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<sup>41</sup> Tennessee Department of Public Instruction, *Annual Report 1901*, 46-59.

<sup>42</sup> Tennessee Department of Public Instruction, *Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction of Tennessee for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1911* (Nashville, Tennessee), 42-82.

<sup>43</sup> Tennessee Department of Public Instruction, *Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction of Tennessee for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1921* (Nashville, Tennessee), 62-114.

<sup>44</sup> Carrie Booker Seat, "A History of the Development of County Public Schools for Negroes in Gibson County, Tennessee From 1931 Through 1950," (master's thesis, Tennessee A & I State University, 1951), 34.



city elementary schools. The average length of term for black county high schools was 180 and the number is unknown for city high schools.<sup>45</sup> Though the value of school property steadily increased due to increased rural school construction and reformers' activism, out of twenty-six African American schools in 1931, twenty-two had no funding for libraries. The remaining four schools had only 155 books in total.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, African American enrollment for children in Gibson County between the ages of five and nineteen hovered just above 75 percent. Attendance of those students enrolled in school ranged from 83 percent to 93 percent, respectively.<sup>47</sup> In 1940, there were 2,917 black children between the ages of five and nineteen in Gibson County, and 2,232 of those children were enrolled in school.<sup>48</sup> Between 1930 and 1950, local school officials consolidated many of the smaller African American schools, leaving eleven one-teacher schools in 1950 out of the twenty one-teacher schools in 1930.<sup>49</sup>

A clear improvement in teacher training for African Americans can also be seen in the 1940s. In 1930, eleven African American teachers educated students without a high school degree, no doubt a reflection of the opportunities and low pay afforded to them at

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<sup>45</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, *Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1931* (Nashville, Tennessee), 106-52.

<sup>46</sup> Seat, "County Public Schools," 62.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

the time. Beginning in the 1939-1940 academic year, African American teachers who obtained less than a high school education were no longer teaching in Gibson County classrooms. Teachers in African American schools in Gibson County taught an average of twenty-nine students per class between 1940 and 1950, an average ten pupil decrease from the 1930s due to a higher number of educators and the impact of increased federal funding.<sup>50</sup>

By 1950, there were 3,521 white public schools and 911 black public schools in Tennessee serving 566,326 white students and 109,308 black students enrolled in grades one through twelve. Average length of school term held at 176 days.<sup>51</sup> Change, though, was coming soon for Tennessee students, teachers, and communities across Tennessee. Educational activists and countless African Americans labored and lobbied for desegregation, or at the very least truly equal educational facilities. On May 17, 1954, however, the United States Supreme Court determined that separate schools were inherently unequal.<sup>52</sup>

The court's decision did not, however, immediately end segregation. The ruling lacked specificity, failing to detail how or how quickly schools would desegregate. By 1960, the number of black and white public schools in Tennessee sharply declined as a result of consolidation: 2,145 white public schools and 569 black public schools. Net

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>51</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, *Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1951* (Nashville, Tennessee), 46.

<sup>52</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*; 347; U.S.; 483; (1954).

enrollment, however, increased to 831,774 students.<sup>53</sup> Widespread segregation persisted in many southern school systems until the early 1970s and some communities still face the challenges of integrating faculties, administrations, and students in public schools. By studying these statistics in tandem with the development of Tennessee's segregated public school system, we can better contextualize the history of Gibson County's schools and the experience of African American students within these schools that drives their preservation efforts.

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<sup>53</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, *Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1961* (Nashville, Tennessee), 62-63.

## CHAPTER III

## CASE STUDIES: FOUR AFRICAN AMERICAN SCHOOLS IN GIBSON COUNTY

“You know, if we were to look back at how we were living in Jim Crow, living in segregation, living in segregated schools, it’s hard to believe that it was America, but it really was.”<sup>1</sup> –Anna Deavere Smith

The racial struggles of the South from emancipation to the modern civil rights movement are reflected in the history of Gibson County, Tennessee. The Tennessee General Assembly established Gibson County on October 21, 1823 and named it in honor of Colonel John H. Gibson, who served under Andrew Jackson. In January 1824, officials organized the county government. The city of Trenton (the location of Trenton Rosenwald School), formerly Gibson Port, became the county seat.<sup>2</sup> Milan (the location of Polk-Clark School) dates its community origins to 1858 when Shady Grove settlement moved to the construction site of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad.<sup>3</sup> In 1872, the Illinois Central Railroad established the small town of Kimball. The town name was later changed to Bradford (the location of Mt. Zion Negro School) in honor of an early settler, Robert Bradford.<sup>4</sup> The Illinois Central Railroad also established the railroad village of Sitka (the location of Sitka School) in 1873. The company chose the location as a siding

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<sup>1</sup> www.brainyquote.com (2015).

<sup>2</sup> Frederick M. Culp, “Gibson County,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=542> (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Frederick M. Culp and Mrs. Robert E. Ross, *Gibson County Past and Present: The First General History of One of Tennessee’s Pivotal Counties* (Trenton: Gibson County Historical Society, 1961), 167.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

for its trains between Jackson, Tennessee and Fulton, Kentucky. Officials chose the name Sitka because the name was concise and did not appear on any maps.<sup>5</sup>

Four extant school buildings for once segregated African American schools remain in the county: Mt. Zion Negro School, Polk-Clark School, Trenton Rosenwald School, and Sitka School. Summary histories of the four schools vary in detail and length. Such is the result of researching rural African American schools. Silences in African American history are not uncommon. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot demonstrates, silences enter history in four ways: “the making of sources...the making of archives...the making of narratives...and the making of history in the final instance.”<sup>6</sup> School histories are particularly influenced by the “making of sources” and the “making of archives” because African American community members often contributed money and manual labor to the establishment of schools which went undocumented. Thus, their contributions would not appear in the archives. Contributions made by communities working with the Rosenwald Fund, however, are more likely to be documented and appear in numerous Rosenwald papers distributed throughout archives in the South. While recently in the “making of narratives,” historians have begun to incorporate more African American voices in their work, the “making of history in the final instance” continues to create silences in African American history as segregated schools are torn down or left abandoned.

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<sup>5</sup> Ernest R. Pounds, *An Early History of Gibson County and its Communities* (Clarksville: Jostens Printing and Publishing, 2011), 300.

<sup>6</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

Polk-Clark School and Trenton Rosenwald School, both high schools, are better documented than Mt. Zion and Sitka also because they were each built using grant money from the Rosenwald Fund and served more urban areas of Gibson County. Polk-Clark and Trenton Rosenwald are also sprawling school complexes, unlike Mt. Zion and Sitka which are one and two-room schoolhouses. In addition, Polk-Clark and Trenton Rosenwald each have current uses, whereas Mt. Zion and Sitka do not. Polk-Clark also benefits from an active alumni group that has conducted extensive research on the school.

The history of each school is paired with a brief architectural description. The buildings themselves must be viewed as artifacts as they are contributing elements to the material culture and history of African American education. Construction elements, floor plans, geographic location, etc., are all considered primary sources of evidence throughout this chapter. Variations in the aforementioned categories and histories of the schools represents the myriad forces affecting segregation-era school architecture like funding, community support, the Jeanes Fund, the Rosenwald Fund, New Deal programs, and desegregation. It is also demonstrative of how each school in Gibson County has a distinctive, yet undeniably linked, place in the history of segregated education.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The information included here is a culmination of the work of various scholars, students, teachers, and community members who have worked collaboratively to ensure the history of segregated education in Gibson County is not forgotten. Photographs, unless otherwise stated, are courtesy of Dr. Carroll Van West and the Center for Historic Preservation.

## MT. ZION NEGRO SCHOOL



Figure 1. Mt. Zion Negro School. 2013.

Mt. Zion Negro School, or the Old Mt. Zion as it is known in Bradford, is located on a one-acre plot adjacent to the historic Mt. Zion CME Church, now the Mt. Zion Worship Center, and a historic African American cemetery that dates c. 1880. Mt. Zion, or Sion, is mentioned throughout the Old and New Testament in the Bible. While it is the highest geographic point in ancient Jerusalem, its name has become synonymous with a metaphoric symbol for the Holy City and the Promised Land.<sup>8</sup> For most of its history, Mt. Zion was a Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) congregation. African Americans had established the CME faith in nearby Jackson as a division from the then-segregated, white Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Mount Zion,” [www.seetheholyland.net/mount-zion/](http://www.seetheholyland.net/mount-zion/) (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Tara Mitchell Mielnik, “Christian Methodist Episcopal Church,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=251> (2015).

Oral tradition states that “freed slaves” established Mt. Zion in 1870. Indeed, this information is posted outside the school on its official sign. Established, however, does not necessarily mean constructed. The Geographic Names Information lists the church as being organized in 1832.<sup>10</sup> This perhaps alludes to a slave congregation formed within the local white church. An approximate nineteenth-century date is also confirmed by the church’s cornerstone that states that the church was “organized in the 1800s.” At present, it is unclear whether “freed slaves” is meant to describe African Americans who were freed before the Civil War or as part of the greater emancipation.

In 1855, David P. Hamilton deeded one acre of land to A.P Foster, T.S Freeman and G. B Rust for the sum of \$5.<sup>11</sup> Census records indicate that all four of these men were white, landowning farmers. David P. Hamilton and T.S Freeman were perhaps neighbors as they both appear on the same roll in the 1860 Agricultural Census.<sup>12</sup> The document indicated that the land was deeded for the establishment of “Mount Zion meeting house” and “said church.” Use of this language is not surprising as “meeting house” could mean a church, school, or both. If the men in the deed were indeed neighbors, this meetinghouse could have been a separate church for their slaves.

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<sup>10</sup> Geographic Names Information System. <http://geonames.usgs.gov> (2014).

<sup>11</sup> 1855 Deed. Courtesy of Hollis Skinner, Trenton, Tennessee.

<sup>12</sup> 1850 United States Population Census; 1860 United States Population Census; 1860 United States Agricultural Census.





Figure 2. Historic Mt. Zion. Photo Credit: Courtesy of Hollis Skinner.

Construction of the current building took place between 1910 and 1920, judging from the building materials that most likely date ca. 1900. The width of the floorboards, 3.5 inches, suggests twentieth-century construction. A notched log foundation indicates the current school could have been built upon the foundation of an earlier building. Gibson County Jeanes Supervisor Carrie Booker Seat's thesis, "A History of the Development of County Public Schools for Negroes in Gibson County, Tennessee From 1931 Through 1950," provides descriptions and statistics for all Gibson County's African American schools, and details the "fact of segregation and the attendant evils."<sup>13</sup> Her thesis gives a firm construction date: "Mt. Zion, the oldest building in the county, was

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<sup>13</sup> Carrie Booker Seat, "A History of the Development of County Public Schools for Negroes in Gibson County, Tennessee From 1931 Through 1950," (master's thesis, Tennessee A & I State University, 1951), 16.

erected in 1920. It is a one-teacher, frame building with no lunch or cloak room. The playground consists of about one half acre and contains no playground equipment.”<sup>14</sup> In stating that it is the oldest building in the county, she likely means the oldest African American school building. No evidence exists that a lunch room or cloak room were ever added to the schoolhouse.



Figure 3. Mt. Zion, North and West Elevations. 2013.

Mt. Zion, historically and currently, is a one-room one-story building. The schoolhouse is of frame construction and covered by a metal gable roof. The exterior facades are clad in vertical and horizontal wooden planks. The schoolhouse has a rectangular floor plan with dimensions measuring 35.2 feet long by 19.3 feet wide. Mt. Zion has six, four over one wood windows, also framed in wood, located on the eastern and western elevations. At one time, the schoolhouse had a porch adjacent to the entryway that has since been removed.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 52-53.



Figure 4.1. Interior of Mt. Zion (a). 2013.



Figure 4.2. Interior of Mt. Zion (b). 2013.

Original interior features included a chalkboard and stovepipe. At one time, linoleum tile was laid over the original wooden floors. While the tile still remains intact at the front of the classroom, the tile has been stripped from the floor in the back of the classroom. Wood paneling (popular in the late 1950s and 1960s) that once lined the classroom has also been stripped from the walls revealing Mt. Zion's original white washed interior walls. The school has no heating or cooling systems, and is not wired for electricity.



Figure 5.1. Deming, Co. Pump. 2013.



Figure 5.2. "The Old Mt. Zion Negro School" Sign. 2013.

In addition to the church and cemetery, other property features include a water pump and a recently placed school sign. The well water hand pump was made by the Deming Co. This Salem, Ohio company was originally the Silver and Dole Co. until John Deming bought a one-third interest in the company in 1866. Through death and company

restructuring, the firm became the Deming Co. in 1890. Interestingly, John Deming identified with the anti-slavery movement throughout his life and was also a good friend of Sojourner Truth.<sup>15</sup>

Today, the school is identified by a sign erected by Mike Sowell and Aaron Troyer of Troyer's Lawn Care in 2012.<sup>16</sup>

Mt. Zion's design and construction is, in a word, humble. One-room frame construction, however, was a common design for both African American and white rural schools at the time of Mt. Zion's construction. Schoolhouses of this period have a strikingly vernacular quality, undoubtedly a reflection of the lack of money Gibson County's school board chose to invest in its black public schools. During its period of construction, Gibson County had not yet availed itself of the Rosenwald school building program, and federal money was not widely available in the area until the Great Depression and World War II era.

In 1920, the value of school property per child in Gibson County was only \$20, \$75 below the national average and \$24 below the Tennessee average in 1918.<sup>17</sup> Mt. Zion was one of two frame elementary schools constructed between July 1, 1920 and June 30,

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<sup>15</sup> "John Deming, Industrialist," Salem, Ohio History, [www.salemohiohistory.com/HistoryMakers/John-Deming.aspx](http://www.salemohiohistory.com/HistoryMakers/John-Deming.aspx) (2014).

<sup>16</sup> *Tri-City Reporter*, November 27, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Tennessee Department of Public Instruction, *Annual Report of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction of Tennessee for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1921* (Nashville, Tennessee), 29.



1921. It was also one of 107 frame elementary schools in Tennessee's county school system.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 6.1 “Students At Old Mt. Zion School.”  
Photo Credit: *Tri-City Reporter*, 1983.



Figure 6.2. Mt. Zion Classroom.  
Photo Credit: *Gibson County Gibscene*, 1953.<sup>19</sup>

A 1925 photograph featured in a 1983 edition of the *Tri-City Reporter* shows a group of forty-three first through eighth grade students standing just outside Mt. Zion's present building. These students were among the 1,379 African American children enrolled in county elementary schools that year.<sup>20</sup> It is remarkable that so many children attended school in such a confined space, but equally remarkable that generations of students attended Mt. Zion, including community activist Hollis Skinner's mother (b. 1923) and father (b. 1922). The last class to graduate from Mt. Zion was the class of 1962. After 1962, students were moved to Trenton Rosenwald School.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>19</sup> The *Gibson County Gibscene* was a yearbook published by Gibson County school officials for the county's African American schools.

<sup>20</sup> Tennessee Department of Public Instruction, *Annual Report 1921*, 68.

## POLK-CLARK SCHOOL



Figure 7. Polk-Clark Enrichment Center. 2010.

Before the construction of Gibson County Training School, Polk-Clark School's original name, there were no African American high schools in Gibson County. The closest African American high school was more than twenty miles away in Madison County. The campaign to build a public African American high school in Gibson County began in May 1924. Ollie H. Bernard, State Agent for Negro Schools, reported "the Milan school authorities [were] planning to erect a modern four or five-teacher school building for the colored people of the town and community." The first step in establishing a secondary school for African Americans was to acquire "county training school" status for the Milan Colored School, the designation given to public secondary schools for blacks built with assistance from the John F. Slater Fund.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Carroll Van West, et. al, "Gibson County Training School," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Tennessee Historical Commission (2012), 7.

Bernard secured county training school status for Milan Colored School in 1925 and lobbied local school officials for a new school building. Legally, the school property would belong to Gibson County, but the City of Milan School Board would be in charge of the daily operations of the school. A portion of Gibson County's high school funds would be allocated to the City of Milan to support the programs at the county training school. However, all plans for progress were temporarily halted when Milan Colored School burned in the fall of 1925. Not to be deterred, teachers and students resumed class in the first floor of the Masonic lodge while plans were developed for a new school. In keeping with the tradition of local African American initiative, local farmer and storeowner George W. Adams, Sr. rallied black community members to convince Tom Coleman (a local land owner) to deed land for a new school. Such efforts resulted in the acquisition of a ten-acre lot on Harris Street.<sup>22</sup>

By August 1926, Gibson County had committed funding to the project making it eligible for aid from the state and a grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fund. Total cost of construction for the county training school was \$20,000. African American community members contributed \$2,500 while the Rosenwald Fund contributed \$1,500 to construction costs. Gibson County Training School opened in September 1926 and ushered in a new era of African American education in Gibson County.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 8.



Figure 8. Original Gibson County Training School. Photo Credit: Fisk University Rosenwald Fund Card Database, 1928.

The new school complex had four classrooms, an office, an industrial room, and an auditorium for first through tenth grade students. It also included rooms for industrial training and home economics. The training school soon expanded its academic program to gain high school status, adding an eleventh grade in 1927. The transition of Gibson County Training School to a four-year high school, however, was a difficult one. Knowing there would only be one four-year high school for African Americans in Gibson County, black communities in Milan, Trenton, and Humboldt prepared to compete against each other for the designation. Ultimately, Gibson County Training School was named the four-year high school in 1929. Four classrooms, two on either end, were added to the original school in 1942.<sup>23</sup>

New Deal programs during the Great Depression and federal presence in Milan before and during World War II each affected Milan's economy and Gibson County Training School. Robert E. Clay, a Rosenwald building agent, spearheaded a bid to the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 9-11.



National Youth Administration (NYA) for a new gymnasium at the school. Local officials and New Deal leaders apparently failed to follow that initiative. In 1940, the Army began operations in Milan at the Milan Army Ammunition Plant (also known as the Milan Arsenal). The plant's initial objective was to supply British troops before the United States entered the war, and then continued to supply U.S troops upon entry. In 1942, local news articles reported that the Federal Works Agency was "paying its way in utilization of Tennessee's educational facilities for children of workers in wartime industries," contributing approximately \$14,500 for a structural addition to Gibson County Training School.<sup>24</sup>

Since there were so many children of "federally connected" personnel in Milan, Milan was the beneficiary of congressionally appropriated funding to school boards throughout the Cold War era. While these funds assisted in the hurried "equalization" of black and white public school facilities, they could never compensate for the separateness which the Supreme Court ruled inherently unequal in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. Among the changes made to the school, and therefore changes in student's educational experience, were the construction of a new gymnasium (1951); curtain and cyclorama for the auditorium (1952); four additional classrooms (1953); new wings to the east and south (1955 and 1958); and an addition of two more classrooms in 1961.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 13

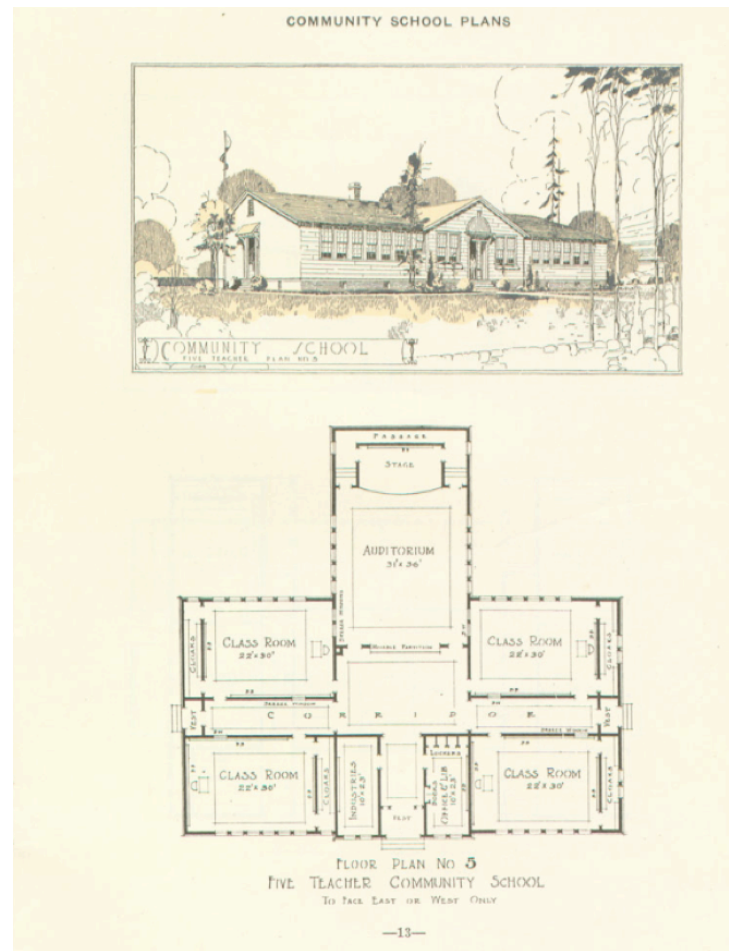


Figure 9. "Five Teacher Community School: To Face East or West Only."  
Photo Credit: [www.historysouth.org](http://www.historysouth.org)

Today, Polk-Clark School sits on a large school site of 15.5 acres. It is a one-story brick school with brick foundation and an asphalt shingle roof. The original Gibson County Training School followed the plan of a five-teacher Rosenwald School, Nashville Plan, East or West Facing. The early school is now encapsulated by the additions made throughout the years.



Figure 10.1. West Elevation of North Classroom Wing.  
Photo Credit: Anne-Leslie Owens. 2010.



Figure 10.2. West Elevation of South Classroom Wing.  
Photo Credit: Anne-Leslie Owens. 2010.

The western elevations of the north and south wings, however, retain their nine-over-nine double hung wood windows that were architecturally character-defining features of Rosenwald schools. Because the school was added to throughout the years the current building has multiple rooflines and a number of separate wings: a main wing, a center projecting wing, a gymnasium addition wing, and a southeast projecting wing.



Figure 11. East Elevation of South Classroom Wing and Elementary School Addition.  
Photo Credit: Anne-Leslie Owens. 2010.

Brick and concrete was used in mid-twentieth-century construction of high schools, perhaps, because it was cheap and readily available. It was also more durable

and required less maintenance than wood. Therefore, it could be claimed as an improvement during the equalization construction movement. Many African American schools in operation during the time have concrete cinder block additions as, like in Milan, school boards scrambled to equalize African American schools in size and quality. Unlike Mt. Zion and Sitka, Polk-Clark has several air conditioning units installed (after desegregation) in its hopper windows.



Figure 12.1. Interior, Rosenwald School Classroom.  
Photo Credit: Anne-Leslie Owens. 2010.



Figure 12.2. Interior, c. 1955 Classroom.  
Photo Credit: Anne-Leslie Owens. 2010.

Inside Polk-Clark, the Rosenwald design is still largely intact retaining its “T” floor plan and original construction materials. Flooring throughout the school includes linoleum tile, industrial carpet, and wood in the gymnasium. The Polk-Clark overall complex is comprised of over forty-five rooms including classrooms, offices, lounges, storage rooms, the gymnasium, and the auditorium that has been converted into a library. Some of the classrooms still retain their chalkboards. Other features located on the property include a covered pavilion, basketball court, and two playgrounds installed in 1994 and 2004.

Gibson County Training School received a new name in 1961: Polk-Clark School. The school was so named for Dr. Silas W. Polk, who initiated the original campaign for

the high school, and Mrs. Saletta Crudup Clark. Clark served as a first grade teacher and Dean of Girls at the high school from 1926 until her death in 1959. In 1961, Polk-Clark was one of fifteen African American schools in Gibson County serving 2,767 students and employing ninety-five teachers.<sup>26</sup>

In 1963, the Gibson County School Board closed and sold several rural African American schools in the county and transferred ownership and responsibility of Polk-Clark to the City of Milan School Board. In 1964, the School Board built the dressing rooms into the basement of the gymnasium, as well as a lobby for the gymnasium (which doubled as the band room). Plans were made for the construction of a new elementary wing in 1967, but the proposal to expand an all African American school conflicted with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which outlawed segregation based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin in “public accommodations.” School systems that persisted in racial segregation of students would be in violation of the Civil Rights Act, and therefore lose federal funding.<sup>27</sup>

In an effort to stave off integration, the Milan School Board instituted “freedom of choice” plans that allowed parents to select which school their children would attend in fall 1964. While twenty-two black children registered for formerly all-white schools, no white children registered for formerly all-black schools. As a result, the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare ordered the Milan School Board to submit a new desegregation plan. City superintendent Jimmy Thomas argued that the proposed new

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<sup>26</sup> Culp and Ross, *Gibson County*, 283.

<sup>27</sup> West, et. al, “Gibson County Training School,” 13.

elementary wing and location of Polk-Clark would attract white students from neighboring communities, improve the effectiveness of the freedom of choice plan, and pave the way for successful desegregation after the development of new school zones. In hopes of having freedom of choice endorsed, the Milan school board moved forward with plans for eight additional classrooms, an office, a first aid room, a library, and a new cafeteria at Polk-Clark. Upon approval of a revised plan for desegregation in July 1965, State Commissioner of Education J.H Warf approved the construction of the elementary wing reopening the door for federal funding.<sup>28</sup>

While the elementary wing was completed in January 1967, it did not stop the movement for school desegregation in Gibson County. Accepting that desegregation was no longer fleeting, the Milan school board initiated plans for building a new high school to replace Polk-Clark School and Milan High School (the all-white high school). Though African Americans were now teaching white students at Milan High School, the Tennessee Department of Education demanded swifter results. The Department suggested moving eleventh and twelfth grade African American students to Milan High School. Despite the fervent response of the Milan school board to secure more transfer students and therefore justify the freedom of choice program, the only students who applied for transfers were African Americans and Latinos. With no willing white transfers, Superintendent Thomas planned to phase out Polk-Clark by moving its ninth grade class to Milan High School in fall 1967.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Polk-Clark graduated its last high school seniors in 1970. The only white children attending Polk-Clark at the time were in kindergarten. After 1970, Polk-Clark operated as an integrated elementary school for kindergarten through second grade students until 1996 when Milan Elementary School opened.<sup>29</sup> Gibson County Training School/Polk-Clark Alumni Association now owns Polk-Clark and the building functions as the Milan Polk-Clark Enrichment Center.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 14.



## TRENTON ROSENWALD SCHOOL



Figure 13. Trenton Rosenwald Middle School. 2013.

The original Trenton Rosenwald School was constructed in 1928 as a one-story brick school on land donated by the Mann Chapman family.<sup>30</sup> The origins of the name Trenton Rosenwald are quite simple: the school was built in Trenton using a matching grant from the Julius Rosenwald Fund. The total construction budget for Trenton Rosenwald was \$14,600. The Rosenwald Fund contributed \$2,100 while the remaining funds came from the local African American community (\$1,500) and public sources (\$11,000). Initially, the school hosted first through eighth grade students who, upon graduation, could attend high school at Gibson County Training School. Trenton Rosenwald grew from a five-teacher school with an eight-month term to a six-teacher school with a nine-month term between 1939 and 1942. While the school housed approximately two hundred students, performance assessments indicate that the school suffered from myriad issues that often plagued segregated African American schools:

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<sup>30</sup> “Trenton Special School District,” <http://trms.trentonssd.org/> (2014).



underfunding, staff turnover, and physical disrepair of school buildings. The school's strengths, however, could be found in their music department that supported a thriving glee club and rhythm band.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 14. Original Trenton Rosenwald School. Photo Credit: Fisk University Rosenwald Fund Card Database, 1929.

Between 1930 and 1950, Trenton's African American population grew over 30 percent as rural farmers migrated to industrial centers. To compensate for a growing high school-aged population, Trenton Rosenwald expanded to include grades nine through twelve sometime after World War II. While the county did not provide bus transportation at this time, rural high school students were able to make the shorter commute to Trenton rather than commute to Milan. For example, high school students from Dyer, Tennessee (eight miles from Trenton) rode with adults working in Trenton. Some who could afford

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<sup>31</sup> "Application for Classification of Approved Rural Elementary School Based on Self-Evaluation by Principals and Teachers," Tennessee Department of Education Records, 1874-1984, Record Group 273, Box 94, Folder 8, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

the fare took a small train called “the dinky”.<sup>32</sup> Mr. Walter Nolan (graduating class of 1948) recalls,

I would walk downtown every morning and there would usually be some nice white people with cars who would take us to Trenton. It was hard, but by the good Lord’s help I made it. Seven miles doesn’t seem like nothing today, but it was a long way back in the old days when you didn’t have cars.<sup>33</sup>

Seat also included observations about Trenton Rosenwald (in 1950) in her thesis:

It is a brick building which has become very dilapidated and overcrowded, and now is in the process of being renovated. A modern brick addition is also being built. The building was erected on a two-acre tract of ground which is very inadequate for the enrollment. There was no central heating plant but this is being taken care of by the new addition. This school embraces twelve grades and has fifteen teachers.

Tragedy struck Trenton in 1953 when fire destroyed Trenton Rosenwald School.

Local newspapers indicate that the Federal Security Agency (established in 1939 to oversee education funding, administration of public health programs, and food and drug safety) quickly approved funding for a new seven-classroom building: “Work will start immediately, since the crowded conditions in this school have increased in the last few years, as announced by Supt. Putnam.”<sup>34</sup> While the school board moved towards new construction with expediency, they neglected immediately expand the size of the overcrowded school. In later years, Trenton Rosenwald expanded with additions of a

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<sup>32</sup> Jerry Wayne Woods, “The Julius Rosenwald Fund School Building Program: A Saga in the Growth and Development of African-American Education in Selected West Tennessee Communities” (PhD diss., University of Mississippi, 1995), 164-65.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *Trenton Herald-Register*, February 12, 1953.

gymnasium, extra classrooms, and science laboratories as part of the equalization process.



Figure 15. South Elevation, Main Entrance. 2013.

The Trenton Rosenwald School, in its present form, is a sprawling complex complete with athletic fields. The four main one-story buildings have red brick exterior, concrete foundations, and flat asphalt roofs. The primary buildings constructed at different dates are connected with hyphens and walkways. The central building, constructed in 1953, is symmetrically designed with the front entrance in the center of the building facing East Second Street. A rear extension contains the cafeteria, locker rooms, and gymnasium. The entire structure is clad with red brick featuring a decorative header course every sixth course. Like Polk-Clark, air conditioning units have been installed in many of the hopper windows since 1970.

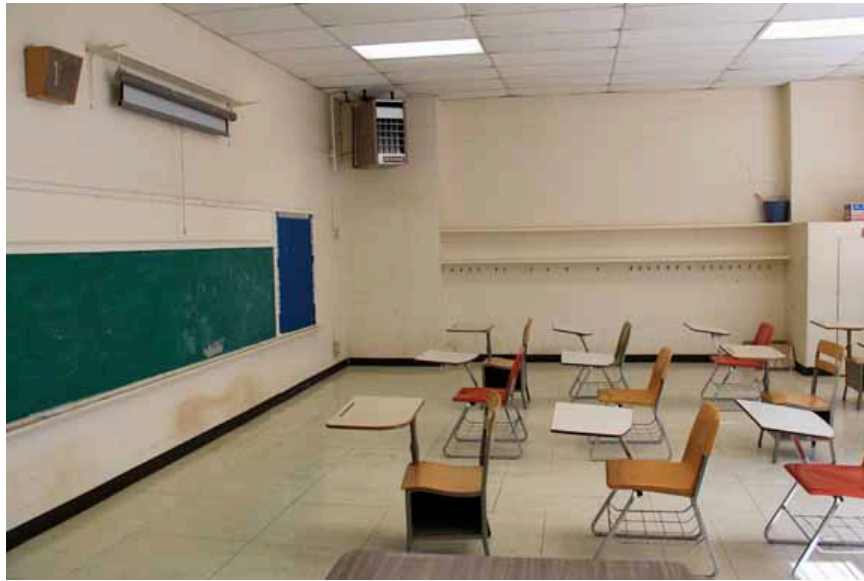


Figure 16. Central Building Classroom. 2013.

Trenton Rosenwald's interior elements include offices, classrooms, and various other functional rooms of various sizes connected by meandering hallways. Many of the classrooms retain chalkboards, sinks, water coolers, and classroom furnishings. Flooring types consist largely of linoleum tile and interior walls are concrete cinder block or brick.



Figure 17.1. East Elevation, Cafeteria and Gymnasium. 2013.

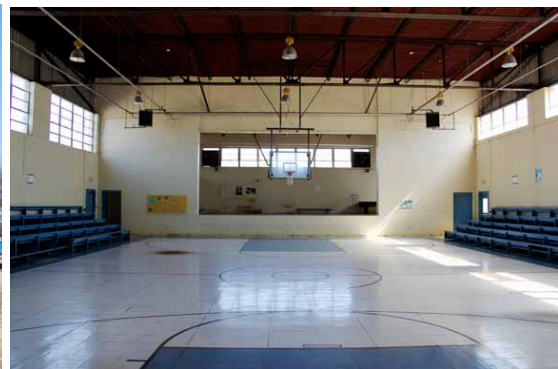


Figure 17.2. Interior, Gymnasium. 2013.

The two-story gymnasium has multiple window bays with four to five, five-light metal hopper windows installed in the second story. The auxiliary building, constructed c. 1954, located east of the central building is comprised of seven classrooms and is designated as the 'elementary wing.' The brick design with the header coursing is

noticeably missing, indicating a later construction date ca. 1964. The south façade contains four classrooms with large bays of five, ten-light hopper windows with concrete sills. In place of the sixth window are solid, metal exterior doors with a small concrete stoop. The north façade contains three large window bays and a pair of two, ten-light hopper windows indicating the bathrooms.



Figure 18. South Elevation of Auxiliary Building, Featuring Secondary Entrance. 2013.

Another auxiliary building, constructed c. 1954, is located west of the central building and features additional classrooms and workshops. The building has similar brick work and windows as the elementary wing. The building features a secondary front entrance with a possible location for signage. The presence of a header course of brick along the foundation suggests a different construction date than the elementary wing. Joined directly to the north façade is an extension of classrooms that does not have the foundation header course but does feature brick sills rather than concrete.

Hollis Skinner, Mt. Zion graduate and Trenton Rosenwald graduate of 1959, maintains that the size of the school plant today is the same as when he attended as a student. Skinner shared that he rode the bus for two hours each way from his home near



Bradford, Tennessee (located within the designated twenty-five mile radius) to attend Trenton Rosenwald. During the 1950s, Trenton Rosenwald offered instruction in building trades, typing courses, business courses, and home economics. The school also supported a glee club, and boys and girls basketball teams (the football program was discontinued after the fire in 1953).<sup>35</sup>



Figure 19. Trenton Rosenwald Faculty. Photo Credit: *Gibson County Gibscene*, 1953.

Much like Milan, Trenton, a decade after the *Brown* decision, was still mostly segregated due to “freedom of choice.” Under court order to desegregate, Trenton Rosenwald graduated its last senior class in 1968.<sup>36</sup> After 1968, high school students were transferred to Peabody High School, Trenton’s white high school. It is probable that the elementary grades were also transferred, because Trenton Rosenwald once again

<sup>35</sup> Hollis Skinner, interview by author.

<sup>36</sup> “School Desegregation in Tennessee: 12 Districts Released from Desegregation Orders; 17 Districts Remain Under Court Jurisdiction,” Tennessee Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (April 2008), 22.

reverted to middle school status. However, both white and black students attended the middle school after 1968. To the chagrin of many African American community members, the local school board changed the name to Trenton Middle School. Robert. L. Radford, a former basketball coach (1932-1942), commented:

The black people of the community were outraged by the name change. Some of them were really upset about integration in the first place. The general community felt that the school's name belongs to the people. The citizens organized petition drives and wrote newspaper editorials expressing their dissatisfaction. Many people had only heard the name Rosenwald, but when they changed the name, people got interested in him. It was like a surge of rebirth concerning Rosenwald. Our efforts paid off and the school was given back.<sup>37</sup>

In 1996, Trenton Rosenwald Middle School was relocated to a new facility. The Rosenwald name was kept and the current school serves approximately 430 fifth through eighth grade students. Since the new school opened, the old facility has been largely vacant with the exception of some local business rental and a Head Start program located in a building renovated by Tennessee State University in 2000. The school is now known as the Trenton Community Resource Center. Recently, Trenton Special School District transferred ownership of the community center to Tennessee State University. The university plans to use the building for various school programs, as well as community events and outreach.

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<sup>37</sup> Woods, "School Building Program," 166.

## SITKA SCHOOL



Figure 20. Sitka School. 2011.

Sitka community is located approximately seven miles southeast of Milan and sometimes listed in association with the greater Medina area. Seat's thesis indicates that Sitka School was constructed in 1942 "by the community," likely in conjunction with Works Progress Administration assistance given the federal presence in Milan at the time. It is likely that the community engaged in a school-building campaign much like the Rosenwald school building program when communities received funds from various sources and matching grants. Sitka was one of two frame schoolhouses built during the school year. Sitka housed first through eighth grade students, first through fourth in one room and fifth through eighth in the other. During the school's first year of operation, Sitka educators taught some of the 1,852 students enrolled in Gibson County.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, *Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1942* (Nashville, Tennessee), 90 and 126.



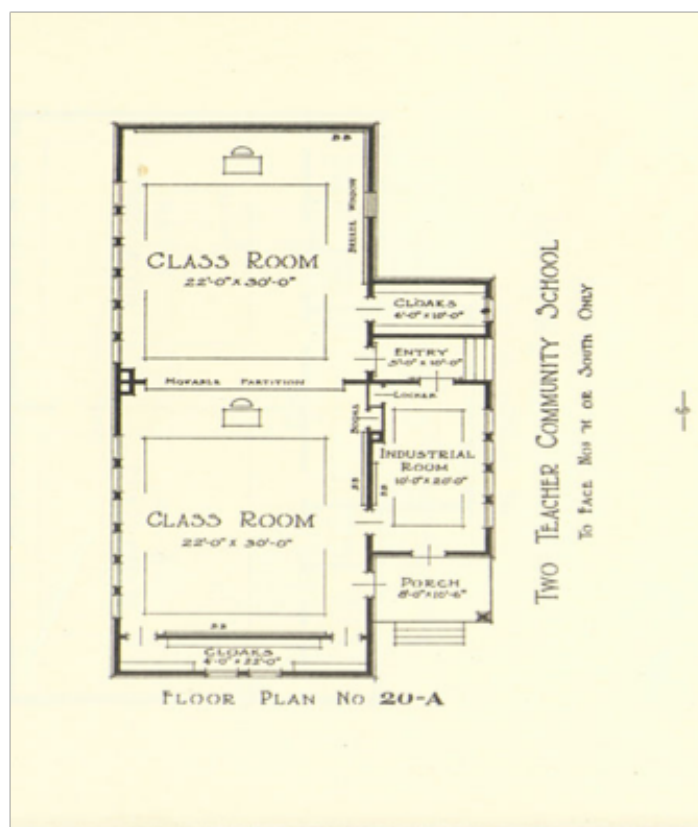


Figure 21. "Two Teacher Community School: To Face North or South Only."  
Photo Credit: [www.historysouth.org](http://www.historysouth.org)

Though Sitka is not a Rosenwald school, the influence of Community School Plans can be seen in almost every aspect of Sitka's construction. Sitka is a two-teacher schoolhouse with a partition, situated north/south similar to Community School Floor Plan 20-A.<sup>39</sup>

Though Sitka does not have a prominent porch, cloak room, or industrial room, it does have a bank of eight, nine-over-nine double hung wood windows, breeze windows, and wainscoting. Sitka rests on a two-acre rectangular plot, closest to the northwest corner. Situating a school in this manner is also consistent with Community School

<sup>39</sup> Julius Rosenwald Fund, "Community School Plans: Bulletin No. 3" (Julius Rosenwald Fund, 1924) via [www.historysouth.org](http://www.historysouth.org), 6.

Plans.<sup>40</sup> The lot also contains structural features like a sidewalk, pavilion, basketball court, and playground equipment. Historic playground equipment was replaced when the land became a park.



Figure 22. Dilapidated Sitka School. Photo Credit: Unknown newspaper, Courtesy of Janice Williams.

Sitka has a gable roof and is clad in horizontal weatherboard. The eastern elevation still retains one of its character defining features: the Sitka School sign. It also has wooden steps leading to a double door entrance, a door for each classroom, under a modest portico. The school has four breeze windows and is resting upon concrete piers. Sitka also has sheet metal roofing accented with wooden dentils.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 2.



Figure 23. South and West Elevation. 2014.

The western elevation is the façade that most closely resembles Rosenwald design. This elevation has a bank of eight, nine-over-nine, double hung wood windows, though few glass panes remain intact. These windows are another element of Sitka's historic character defining features.



24.1. Sitka Classroom (a). 2014.



24.2. Sitka Classroom (b). 2014.

The interior has dual-tone painting with wainscoting up to the base of the windows and each chalkboard. This color scheme was designed to optimize light in the classrooms and add to the beauty, sanitation, and durability of the building. The interior also retains its historic, 1940s light fixtures as well as a hole in the wall, indicating where



the piping from a stove would have been fixated to send smoke through the brick chimney.

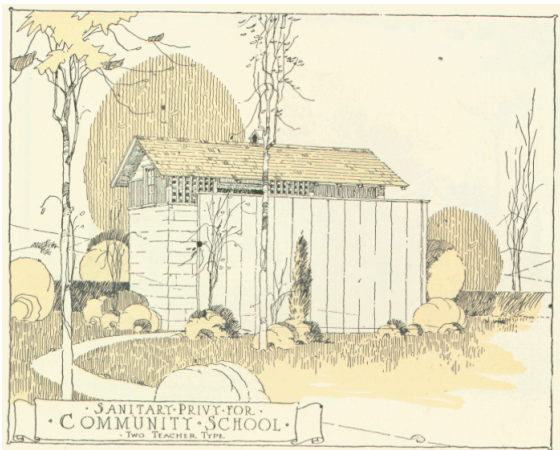


Figure 25.1. "Sanitary Privy For Community School:  
Two Teacher Type."  
Photo Credit: [www.historysouth.org](http://www.historysouth.org)



Figure 25.2. Silas Dawson Memorial Park Restroom. 2014.

Other property features include a basketball court, covered pavilion, play ground equipment, and restroom. The historic playground equipment and outhouse were replaced when the park was created. Even though the replacement bathroom was constructed in the late twentieth-century, it is markedly similar to the Sanitary Privy design outlined in in Rosenwald Community School Plans with its gable roof and windows on the northern and southern façades.<sup>41</sup> The current design is perhaps a modernized recreation based on the historic outhouse. The Silas Dawson Memorial Park sign that once greeted visitors upon arrival is no longer extant, and its whereabouts are unknown.

Teachers at Sitka School included a Ms. Jennie (last name unknown), Ms. Lila Ceats, and Mr. John Woods. Vern and Eleanor Gray were substitute teachers. Thelma

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 22.

Barksdale, later Thelma Roberson, acted as Sitka’s principal.<sup>42</sup> The Barksdale family is representative of the advancement of many African American families across the South. Thelma Barksdale’s grandparents, Henderson and Eliza Barksdale, were born into slavery and raised nine surviving children.<sup>43</sup> Among their children was Dallas “Dalie” Barksdale. He and his wife Vinnie (or Vennie) had four children: Bertha, Crinner, DT, and Thelma. Descendent from enslaved grandparents, born to a father who was self-employed and could read and write, Principal Thelma Barksdale’s family unit shows the growth and new opportunity for African Americans.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 26. “Ground Broken for Silas Dawson Memorial Park.”  
 Photo Credit: Unknown newspaper, Courtesy of Janice Williams. 1991.

<sup>42</sup> Sitka School Alumni, interview by author.

<sup>43</sup> 1900 United States Population Census.

<sup>44</sup> 1920 United States Federal Census.

According to Sitka community members, the school closed some time in the 1950s. Department of Education records support this estimation revealing that the number of “two-teacher grades 1-8 or less” schools decreased from nine to four between 1950 and 1960.<sup>45</sup> In 1967, the Gibson County Board of Education approved the school for continued use as a community center, suggesting that the school operated in some capacity until that date.<sup>46</sup> In 1991, Sitka and the surrounding land became Silas Dawson Memorial Park thanks to the efforts of the Sitka Community Club.<sup>47</sup> Silas Dawson Memorial Park, and therefore Sitka School, is still public property.<sup>48</sup>

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The segregation-era African American schools in Gibson County clearly vary in their size and design. The schools are not only connected through their geographic location, they are also connected through the communities they served. Each school community, and by extension the larger African American community, poured their time and resources into educational institutions that often functioned as centers of community

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<sup>45</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, *Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1951* (Nashville, Tennessee), 51 and Tennessee Department of Education, *Annual Statistical Report of the Department of Education for the Scholastic Year Ending June 30, 1961* (Nashville, Tennessee), 69.

<sup>46</sup> Milan City School Board of Education Minutes, 1966-1967, “Minutes of Gibson County Board of Education Regular Session 21, November 1967,” Milan Special School District Office. Milan, Tennessee.

<sup>47</sup> Unknown newspaper, courtesy of Janice Williams.

<sup>48</sup> State of Tennessee, Comptroller of the Treasury: Real Estate Assessment Data, [www.assessment.state.tn.us](http://www.assessment.state.tn.us) (2014).

life. While the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision was undoubtedly a victory for African American civil rights, desegregation of public schools came slowly and not without considerable white resistance.

## CHAPTER IV

### FROM DESEGREGATION TO PRESERVATION

“In the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal... We hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated... are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.” –*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (347 U.S. 483)

On May 17, 1954, Jim Crow took a crushing blow. Though its effects would not be felt immediately, the ramifications of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* would slowly infiltrate southern public schools. Outrage at the decision was widespread among white southerners, and even a number of black southerners who resisted desegregation on white terms. While certainly a step toward equal citizenship for African Americans, they sacrificed much at the altar of equal opportunity. Cherished African American community institutions were closed and torn down as black students were moved from their schools into the unfamiliar schools of white children. Such sacrifice and loss of educational heritage has led many African American communities, like those in Gibson County, to seek preservation as a sustainable strategy to keep the history of segregated schooling alive at the local level. Extant segregation-era African American schoolhouses help communities to connect the past to the present while ensuring that the material culture of a segregated landscape is not lost.

The fight to desegregate public schools in the United States took place within the larger context of the African American struggle for civil rights and myriad strategies to defeat Jim Crow. Though World War II slightly deterred these efforts in the 1940s, Tennessee’s first public school desegregation case was filed in Anderson County on



December 5, 1950 on behalf of African American citizens in Clinton, the county seat.<sup>1</sup> Tennessee's governor, Frank G. Clement, while choosing not to lead a fight against *Brown*, put decisions regarding desegregation into the hands of local school boards.<sup>2</sup> School officials who wanted to move forward with desegregation, however, were often hesitant for fear of retaliation from militant white segregationists. Fiercest opposition to desegregation came from poor, working-class or lower middle-class whites whose children would be the ones attending school with black children. They regarded *Brown* as a direct threat to their racial superiority, ever so slowly stripping away racial identifiers in public education.

The effects of *Brown*, however, were not immediate. While the Supreme Court ruled segregated schools unconstitutional, it did not give instructions on how desegregation was to proceed until 1955 when it placed responsibility of ending segregation squarely on the shoulders of public school officials. They were to initiate a "prompt and reasonable start," and proceed "with all deliberate speed" to desegregate. Such direction was intentionally vague to give the public time to adjust. Charles S. Aiken maintains that the struggle to desegregate schools in the South took place in three distinct phases spanning two decades: court skirmishes and delays (Summer 1954-Summer 1964); token integration (Autumn 1964-Autumn 1969); and massive desegregation

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<sup>1</sup> Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

(Winter 1970-Autumn 1972).<sup>3</sup> Between 1951 and 1957 (corresponding in part of the first phase of Aiken’s timeline) a total of forty-three public school districts in Tennessee were sued to desegregate schools. The Gibson County School Board, Milan City Special School District, Humboldt City Special School District, and Trenton City Special School District, all in Gibson County, were sued to desegregate in 1970. Gibson County became a special school district in 1982.<sup>4</sup>

In September 1954, the first issue of *Southern School News* went to press, documenting the changes in public school systems throughout the United States. The first issue declared that Tennessee’s reaction to *Brown* was “notable for the lack of inflammatory statements and for the sudden genesis of a ‘let’s wait and see’ attitude.”<sup>5</sup> It was not until May 7, 1956, that judges issued the first ruling by a Tennessee state court that the state’s previously passed laws that required segregation had been nullified by the Supreme Court’s decision on *Brown*.<sup>6</sup> However, the number of black applicants to white schools was still relatively small. As historian Sarah Caroline Thuesen argues,

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<sup>3</sup> Charles S. Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South Since the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 259-62.

<sup>4</sup> “School Desegregation in Tennessee: 12 Districts Released from Desegregation Orders; 17 Districts Remain Under Court Jurisdiction,” Tennessee Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (April 2008), 6-7 and 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Southern School News*, September 1954.

<sup>6</sup> *Southern School News*, June 1956.

“Ideological approval of school integration... was one thing; volunteering one’s children to pave the way was quite another.”<sup>7</sup>

Nashville was among Tennessee’s first major cities to implement desegregation with 3,200 children (41 percent of which were black) affected by a first-grade desegregation plan in September 1957. Superintendent W.A. Bass said: “Whether we agree with the Supreme Court decision or not, we must remember the Court has spoken in this matter, and, more important, a federal court in Nashville has directed us to take the step we are taking in September.”<sup>8</sup> That fall, nineteen black children enrolled at seven formerly all-white elementary schools in Nashville. Their first week witnessed mob activity, a school bombing, and police and legal action against demonstrators, after which only thirteen black children still attended the schools. By the end of September, the number dropped to eleven. By January 1958, only nine of the original thirteen black children remained at the formerly all-white elementary schools.<sup>9</sup>

While parents of the black children seemed generally satisfied with the way their children were being treated in segregated schools, white parents’ attitudes ranged from passive to outright bitter. One mother of a white student could not contain her outrage: “She’d have to go too far away to get to a school without n\*\*\*\*\*s, and I haven’t got time to take her. I don’t like it one bit. The Lord’s against it, so’s the Bible, but I can’t do

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Caroline Thuesen, *Greater Than Equal: African American Struggles for Schools and Citizenship in North Carolina, 1919-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 225.

<sup>8</sup> *Southern School News*, May 1957.

<sup>9</sup> *Southern School News*, February 1958.

anything about it.” Yet another white mother queried: “But I didn’t have to go to school with coloreds and I still don’t see why my child has to. Haven’t we got any rights anymore?”<sup>10</sup>

Conflicted ideas about desegregated schools did, however, remained at the forefront of African American communities’ minds. Said one Nashville father:

I know this school is better than the Negro school he would have attended. Our other child goes there and I know that my boy at the desegregated school is getting a better education. This school is fundamentally better in every respect—teachers, facilities and curriculum—than the Negro school.

One Nashville mother, in defense of black community schools, stated that she did not feel the desegregated school was any better than the black school her child would have attended. She did agree, however, that the desegregated school was more conveniently located with smaller class sizes. She agreed that her child was

[P]robably getting more individual instruction than she would have at the other school. In addition to the facts of closeness and smaller classes, I think our child will probably get some intangible benefits just from going to school with white children that she would not have received otherwise.<sup>11</sup>

When questions arose in later years about the appropriate school level at which to desegregate classrooms, Knoxville City School Superintendent Thomas N. Johnston is quoted as saying that first-graders were hardly likely to be prejudiced: “I have found that little children love just about everything and everybody.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Southern School News*, September 1960.

As a result of desegregation, the number of private schools grew as elite white families hastily moved their children into “safer” environments. Other reasons cited for this growth are “enhanced economic status of families with school-age children” and “dissatisfaction in some areas with public schools.”<sup>13</sup> In 1960, out of Tennessee’s 153 school districts, 142 were listed as biracial, but only four were listed as desegregated meaning the majority of districts with black and white students were still maintaining segregation. 38,494 white children and 13,576 black children attended desegregated schools.<sup>14</sup> By 1961, thirteen districts were listed as desegregated and a greatly increased 214,946 white students and 70,594 black students attended school in those desegregated districts.<sup>15</sup>

In 1954, Thurgood Marshall was quoted by the *Memphis World* at a regional NAACP meeting in Mississippi as saying: “Come hell or high water, we will be free by ’63.” A statement made six days before the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision, many rural areas of the South still had not felt the effects of *Brown* by 1963. Rural communities often did not have access to lawyers who would take civil rights cases concerning desegregation while living in fear of white retaliation.<sup>16</sup> However, the Supreme Court announced on March 30, 1962, that financial assistance would be cut off from some school districts that persisted in segregation, and in September 1963 ruled that segregated

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<sup>13</sup> *Southern School News*, November 1959.

<sup>14</sup> *Southern School News*, February 1960.

<sup>15</sup> *Southern School News*, December 1961.

<sup>16</sup> Lovett, *Civil Rights Movement*, 69.

schools were no longer “suitable” for federal grants for the education of white and black children whose parents lived and worked on federal installations.<sup>17</sup>

In a movement toward token integration in the same year, the U.S. Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Tennessee’s Pupil Assignment Law could not serve as a plan to desegregate schools. The Pupil Assignment Law established twenty-two factors that could be considered by local school boards in assigning students to schools or granting requests to transfer. None of those factors mentioned race. Judge Lester Cecil, in the appeals court decision, remarked that although the General Assembly passed the Pupil Assignment Law in 1957, until March 1960,

‘No Negro pupil had been transferred to a white school, nor had a white pupil been transferred to a Negro school, under the operation of the law... The evidence also shows that there are dual area zone maps, one for white schools and one for Negro schools. These zones may overlap and there may be Negro and white children in the same zone, but each goes to the school for his respective race.’<sup>18</sup>

Despite various legal rulings, by 1964, only 6 percent of three million southern black children were attending school in desegregated schools.<sup>19</sup> In that year Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, Title VI of which expressly prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in federally financed programs. Violation of this statute would result in the loss of federal funding.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Southern School News*, April 1962.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Lovett, *Civil Rights Movement*, 69.

<sup>20</sup> Aiken, *Cotton Plantation South*, 264.

In 1965, Commissioner John Howard Warf reported that 110 of the 152 public school systems in Tennessee had signed “Assurance of Compliance” forms or had field plans for compliance with the act. 141 of those districts had both white and black students.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Tennessee was the first state in the South to report that all its school districts agreed to comply with the terms of the Civil Rights Act. 136 schools signed “Assurance of Compliance” forms, eight submitted copies of federal court orders, and the remaining eight offered plans of desegregation.<sup>22</sup> By this time, Tennessee had increased its spending on public education from \$68.3 million in 1953 to \$267 million in 1965.<sup>23</sup>

In 1967, the Tennessee Commission on Human Rights issued a report entitled “School Desegregation in Tennessee, 1965-1966.” The information contained within the report revealed, despite earlier promise, a relative lack of progress in Tennessee’s public school system. The report noted that of the 2,167 schools in Tennessee, 1,100 were all-white schools, while 358 were all-black schools. African American students constituted 20.4 percent of the total school age population and only 8.1 percent of African American teachers worked in integrated faculties.<sup>24</sup> Of those black students, 10.0-39.9 percent attended desegregated public schools in the 1966-1967 school year.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Southern School News*, February 1965.

<sup>22</sup> *Southern School News*, March 1965.

<sup>23</sup> Lovett, *Civil Rights Movement*, 105.

<sup>24</sup> Lovett, *Civil Rights Movement*, 79.

<sup>25</sup> Aiken, *Cotton Plantation South*, 268.

In the 1968 case *Green v. County School Board of New Kent*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “freedom of choice” attendance plans were ineffective for integration and ordered that federal courts had to examine not only student assignment when assessing Title IV compliance, but also examine every factor of school operations. These factors, commonly known as the “Green” factors, include student assignment, faculty assignment, staff assignment, extracurricular activities, transportation, and facilities. The *Green* decision also established “Unitary Status” as a way to describe desegregated school systems. To be granted Unitary Status, school districts were required to present strong evidence to the courts that segregation in each of the aforementioned factors had been eliminated and would not be resurrected.<sup>26</sup>

African American students continued to feel the effects of desegregation in the classroom well after *Brown* and *Green*. The report “A Nation at Risk” (1983) revealed that “African American students were three times as likely to be enrolled in a class for the educable mentally retarded, as were white students, but only one-half likely to be in a class for the gifted and talented.”<sup>27</sup> National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data also showed that only 20 percent of African American students in the eleventh grade could perform complex reading tasks. The average SAT verbal score for African American students was over one hundred points lower than other test takers: 337 compared to 467. In addition, half of African American students who were sophomores in

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<sup>26</sup> “School Desegregation in Tennessee,” 5.

<sup>27</sup> Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and Russell W. Irvine, “The Impact of the Desegregation Process on the Education of Black Students: A Retrospective Analysis,” *Journal of Negro Education* 76, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 298.



high school in 1980 had either dropped out or graduated “high-risk” by 1984. In 1980, African American teachers represented only 12 percent of the teaching population.<sup>28</sup>

Twenty years later, Tennessee’s areas with the highest percentage of African American students were Memphis (86.3), Fayette County (65.8), Haywood County (64.4), Jackson-Madison County (53.4), Nashville-Davidson County (45.7), Union City (41.9), Hamilton County (33.1), Shelby County (23.0), and Murfreesboro (21.3). These students suffered a higher percentage of suspensions than other racial groups.<sup>29</sup>

Today, children between the ages of five and nineteen comprise approximately 21 percent of Gibson County’s total population. African Americans comprise 18.8 percent of the total population.<sup>30</sup> Gibson County Special School District serves nine schools: Dyer School, Gibson County High School, Kenton Elementary, Medina Elementary, Medina Middle School, Rutherford School, South Gibson County High School, Spring High School, and Yorkville School.<sup>31</sup> Humboldt City Special School District has four schools: East Elementary School, Humboldt Middle School, Humboldt High School, and Stigall Primary School.<sup>32</sup> Milan City Special School District operates three schools: Milan Elementary School, Milan Middle School, and Milan High School.<sup>33</sup> Trenton City

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Lovett, *Civil Rights Movement*, 104.

<sup>30</sup> “Demographics,” [www.gibsoncountyttn.com](http://www.gibsoncountyttn.com) (2015).

<sup>31</sup> “Gibson County Special School District,” [www.gcssd.org](http://www.gcssd.org) (2015).

<sup>32</sup> “Humboldt City Schools,” [www.humboldtcitysd.schoolinsites.com](http://www.humboldtcitysd.schoolinsites.com) (2015).

<sup>33</sup> “Milan Special School District,” [www.milanssd.org](http://www.milanssd.org) (2015).

Speical School District operates three schools as well: Trenton Elementary School, Trenton Rosenwald Middle School, and Peabody High School.<sup>34</sup> Bradford Special School District, the most recently formed district, has only two schools: Bradford Elementary School and Bradford High School.<sup>35</sup> As of 2008, Gibson County Speical School District and Humboldt City Speical School District were still working to obtain Unitary Status, or full desegregation. Milan City Special School District planned to remain under Court Order without seeking Unitary Status. Trenton City Speical School District wanted to pursue Unitary Status, but was deterred by the “complicated process.”<sup>36</sup>

Segregation, regardless of legal standing, still exists. There has been a rise in the twenty-first century of legal segregation based on family settlement patterns, also known as “residential segregation.”<sup>37</sup> In 2006, the average white student attended a school that was 80 percent white. The Civil Rights Project report (2006) postulated that by 2014, the gap between advantaged whites and disadvantaged minority students would only continue to grow. It predicted that by 2014, “less than twenty five percent of poor and black students will achieve NAEP proficiency in reading, and less than fifty percent will achieve proficiency in mathematics.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Trenton Special School District,” [www.trentonssd.org](http://www.trentonssd.org) (2015).

<sup>35</sup> “Bradford Special School District,” [www.bradfordssd.schoolinsites.com](http://www.bradfordssd.schoolinsites.com) (2015).

<sup>36</sup> “School Desegregation in Tennessee,” 22.

<sup>37</sup> Irvine and Irvine, “The Impact of Desegregation,” 298.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Simultaneously, the early twenty-first century saw an increase in African American alumni efforts to celebrate the social and cultural strength of segregated schools, elements which many alumni groups felt were absent from desegregated schools.<sup>39</sup> The cultural toll of desegregation, represented in the disparaging statistics regarding African American education, were a large factor in the rise of preservation of segregation-era African American schools. African Americans lost important symbols of their educational heritage during desegregation. When their schools were closed, they lost names, mascots, mottos, holidays, and traditions that were not transferred to white schools. Desegregation on white terms undermined the role of the school in black society. For many black parents and students, the newly desegregated schools were still intimately connected to white schools in values, traditions, political sensibilities, and cultural orientation. In addition, when they lost their black school leaders, parents felt deprived of a representative voice in their children's education, making it difficult to muster support for schools and the motivation for students to succeed.<sup>40</sup> Many black students found that white educators did not relate to them on a cultural or social level. After living in segregated worlds for so long, black students and white teachers communicated poorly with one another, misunderstood expectations, and mishandled classroom instruction.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Thuesen, *Greater Than Equal*, 255.

<sup>40</sup> David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 9.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

*Brown* also failed to address to other fundamental black concerns. First, *Brown* largely ignored the deep investment many African Americans had in their schools as centers of community strength and pride. Second, it overlooked school board politics. While *Brown* called for integrated classrooms, it did nothing to insure the integration of education policy-making boards.<sup>42</sup> Further, prior to desegregation, the African American community was an essential component to a child's success. Desegregation diluted communities' generation-long struggle for education by moving African American students from their community schools and into the unfamiliar schools of white children. The nature of school desegregation largely ignored the possibility that there were elements of African American culture worthy of preservation and celebration.

By and large, desegregation proceeded as if there were no African American educational culture at all. As a result, no one even considered the destructive consequences that desegregation would have on African American communities, essentially erasing important elements of African American culture.<sup>43</sup> Among those important elements are the schoolhouses themselves. In the destruction of African American schoolhouses, vital aspects of the material culture of African American education were also lost. Evidence of slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and racism

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<sup>42</sup> Thuesen, *Greater Than Equal*, 203.

<sup>43</sup> Van Dempsey and George Noblit, "Cultural Ignorance and School Desegregation: A Community Narrative," in *Beyond Desegregation: The Politics of Quality in African American Schooling*, ed. Mwalimu J. Shujaa (Newbury Park: Corwin Press, Inc., 1996), 115-37.

were prevented from becoming a part of a national history by having all evidence removed.<sup>44</sup>

There are still, however, remnants of a racially segregated public landscape in places like Gibson County. The groups that support the preservation of Mt. Zion, Polk-Clark, Trenton Rosenwald, and Sitka all recognize the loss of heritage and seek preservation as a way to remember and celebrate their schools' histories. Many other African American communities across the South have exhibited this same desire to protect their educational heritage through preservation. Elgin L. Klugh has worked with such communities in Florida. His research found that despite age and deterioration of the buildings, community members are often determined to invest time and resources that are necessary to restore these schools. Though many are inadequate for reuse as modern schools, they are valued for their historical symbolism. They are also valued for their potential as a renewed place of community identity.<sup>45</sup>

Historian Mary S. Hoffschwelle has also written about community-based preservation of Rosenwald schools. There are still hundreds of Rosenwald schools that remains across the South. "Rosenwald Street" and "Rosenwald Softball Fields" are not uncommon indicators of where community members attended school and played. Rosenwald buildings are used as schools, churches, community institutions, and centers for social programming. Hoffschwelle asserts that the survival and preservation of

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<sup>44</sup> Paul A. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003), 180.

<sup>45</sup> Elgin L. Klugh, "Reclaiming Segregation-Era, African American Schoolhouses: Building on Symbols of Past Cooperation," *Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 246.

Rosenwald schools reflects “the processes by which buildings gain and change meanings as people come together to build and use them.”<sup>46</sup>

The African American communities in Gibson County are engaging in the process of community-based preservation and are working to ensure that a piece of their educational heritage is not lost. Their preservation initiatives are motivated by the yearning to honor the work of their forbearers, and to preserve that legacy for future generations. Preservation gives us a “visual vocabulary” to talk about segregated education.<sup>47</sup> This visual vocabulary is particularly important when we consider that African American history and public history are often based on a strong oral tradition, and frequently lack written documentation. The material culture and visual vocabulary of these schoolhouses “have the power to subvert the status quo by their very presence.”<sup>48</sup> The extant segregated schoolhouses in Gibson County are subverting the status quo and daring us all not to talk about “separate but equal” and desegregation.

Public schools were one of the most overt symbols of public segregation. The current landscape of desegregation is littered with abandoned and modified school buildings, each experiencing some of the problems of the places left behind.<sup>49</sup> Each of the

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<sup>46</sup> Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006), 280.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Ann Denkler, “Subverting Heritage and Memory: Investigating Luray’s ‘Old Slave Auction Block,’” in *“We Shall Independent Be”: African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, eds. Leslie M. Alexander and Angel David Nieves (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 187-98.

<sup>49</sup> Aiken, *Cotton Plantation South*, 368.

four schools discussed in this thesis has a similar, yet unique landscape that all contribute to the conversation about segregation and desegregation. In their present form, they also each have preservation needs to be tackled in the future.<sup>50</sup> However, it is equally important to remember that preservation is not only about the physical needs of a structure; it is also about the story it tells.

The current landscape of Mt. Zion is undoubtedly quite similar to when it was in operation as a school. It is in a very rural (indeed, in the middle of a field), isolated location with the exception of some scattered houses, the church building, and a historic cemetery. Much of the scenery in Carrie Booker Seat's description of the school is still present. When you look out the windows of the school, you might see the same things as twentieth-century students: fields. There are hints of the passage of time like the church building, a paved parking lot, and the headstones of generations of African American families who attended the church and school. The school's location on the landscape makes clear how far children would have travelled to attend Mt. Zion.

As the oldest school in Gibson County, Mt. Zion is not without physical preservation needs. Among the most immediate issues, along with finding a use for the building, are security and cosmetic maintenance that stem primarily from the broken windows. When intact, windows provide a barrier between the outside weather elements and intruders (be they human or otherwise). Animals initiate decay mechanisms while possibly creating nests and/or further damaging surface finishes. The interior and exterior of the structure are also littered with debris.

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<sup>50</sup> This thesis does not include preservation recommendations, only brief assessments of needs.

Some of the long-term issues revolve around missing weatherboards and insect infestation. The rear exterior façade needs a large-scale replacement of weatherboards. Though some are still intact, many are broken, rotted or completely missing. The absence of these weatherboards also allows wasps, dirt daubers, and other pests to build their nests within the empty spaces. These insects bore holes into the wood and weaken the structure. The concrete supports for the structure also appear to be shifting. In addition, the brick chimney is deteriorating. Because of the porous nature of masonry, it is easy for bricks to be damaged by moisture.

The Polk-Clark landscape is markedly different than that of Mt. Zion. It is, however, still in a predominantly African American section of town. In December 2012, the Polk-Clark Enrichment Center received a “Needs Assessment” created by members of Middle Tennessee State University’s Essentials of Historic Preservation and Cultural Resource Management class that detailed numerous preservation needs. Some of them are enumerated here.

According to the report, moisture is the primary cause of the majority of the damage throughout the Polk-Clark Enrichment Center. The biological growth at the foundation of the building and the growth up the walls is the result of excessive ground moisture, which could come from the lack of gutters to divert the water away from the foundation. The majority of the building lacks a gutter system. Some of those that do exist are damaged or have fallen off the roof’s eave. Moisture could also come from the ground itself, if the water is not draining properly, from a high water table underground,



or a combination of these factors. Moisture rises from the wet ground infiltrating the bricks and concrete blocks, which is known as “rising damp.”<sup>51</sup>

The report also discussed issues with Polk-Clark’s crawl spaces. Crawl spaces can be chronically damp areas due to rising damp, high humidity, insufficient air circulation, and standing water from flooding. These factors cause fungus and mold growth, which deteriorate building materials faster. In regards to energy efficiency, vented crawl spaces create the “stack effect.” The stack effect occurs when hot air enters the crawl space, but instead of circulating back out, rises into the building, making the rooms stuffy.<sup>52</sup>

Polk-Clark’s electrical room is also severely threatened by moisture. Moisture does seen and unseen damage by saturating porous building materials such as brick, stone, concrete, wood framing, plaster, gypsum board, and ceiling tiles. This moisture content and damage is an invitation for insects. Polk-Clark had many problems with leaking roofs that were repaired; however, the building still has other sources of leaks like the windows in many of the classrooms. Throughout the entire building, damaged windows and broken air conditioning units are creating large holes. The holes are allowing rain and moisture into the building, damaging the walls, ceiling, and flooring materials.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Nadine Breece, Dallas Hanbury, Julie Warwick, “Polk-Clark Enrichment Center Needs Assessment” (Murfreesboro: Center for Historic Preservation, Middle Tennessee State University, 2012), 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

On exterior walls, the mortar is cracked and missing in some areas; some bricks are loose and out of place. These conditions may hint at damage inside the wall cavity, like the rotting of wall studs and window framing.<sup>54</sup> Peeling is the primary issue with the exterior paint at Polk-Clark and is most evident on window frames and along roof eaves and soffits.

Since Polk-Clark had several additions throughout four decades, there are a variety of windows indicative of the evolution of commercial building materials throughout the twentieth-century. The Rosenwald sections have their original nine-over-nine, double-hung sash windows while later additions feature sets of metal, awning, and hopper windows. Most of these windows show damage from vandalism, wear, and insufficient building maintenance. Damaged original windows throughout the building should be repaired instead of replaced.

Debris from damaged ceiling, wall, and floor finishes, as well as casework, fixtures, and window treatments, is also an issue. Throughout most of the twentieth-century, many building materials and installed finishes, such as floor and ceiling tile, were made with asbestos. Therefore, it is likely that many of the finishes in the enrichment center contain asbestos. Thus, qualified professionals should removed the damaged materials.<sup>55</sup>

The first interior finishes that require attention are the floor and ceiling tiles. Both finishes vary in conditions, with some wings and rooms of the building requiring more

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 7.

immediate attention than others. Several rooms in the building also show signs of failing foundations as evidenced by cracks in the walls. Many of these cracks are in the same location in several consecutive rooms. In several classrooms and corresponding restrooms, there are gaps between the walls and ceilings, showing signs of separation.<sup>56</sup>

The plaster on interior walls of certain classrooms is bubbled and has mold growth. The condition of interior painted surfaces at Polk Clark varies in each wing of the building, and in each set of rooms within those wings. General paint issues include flaking, peeling, cracking, and bubbling. Some walls require only a simple cleaning to remove accumulated dirt and water damage. Preservation issues in the gymnasium include roof damage from storms, broken window, a decaying floor and foundation, and vandalism.<sup>57</sup>

Trenton Rosenwald School is located in Gibson County's more urban county seat. Like Polk-Clark, the school is located in an African American neighborhood. Water damage is also one of Trenton Rosenwald's most pressing preservation issues. While Trenton Rosenwald is generally in good condition, there are signs of water damage to the concrete walls in several of the classrooms. Some of the windows of the central building appear to be leaking causing the protective interior paint to peel and flake. The installation of window air conditioning units may also be contributing to the buildup of moisture.

During fieldwork in 2014, it was brought to our attention that the entire elementary wing was previously flooded during a storm. News accounts indicate that in

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 8 and 25-29.

2010, Trenton experienced severe flooding caused by excessive rain and breach of the nearby levee system. The elementary wing appears to have been completely submerged. Since then, the wing has been cleared of debris and is currently vacant. Upon entering the elementary wing, the interior grade of the hyphen from the central building is very steep indicating a significant drop in elevation. Furthermore, the Federal Emergency Management Agency Flood map indicates that the elementary wing is in a flood plain. The location of the elementary wing is problematic and poses serious challenges to an effort to rehabilitate the school.

Sitka School, like Polk-Clark and Trenton Rosenwald, is located in an African American neighborhood. Though it is not a sprawling complex, it has managed to retain its original plot size due to the grounds becoming a public park. While it certainly has preservation needs, they are not as extensive as Polk-Clark or Trenton Rosenwald given that the school is significantly smaller. There is, however, damage in the southeast corner of the school that coincides with the area on the South façade where the roof has been stripped from the structure. With no protection, water and other damaging element are seeping into the school initiating decay mechanisms.

The school's broken windows (on the West elevation) are problematic as well because they leave the building susceptible to weather and intruders (be they human or otherwise). The interior also suffers from insect infestation and is littered with debris.

While it is certainly important to discuss physical preservation needs of these schools, it is equally important to discuss who is preserving these schools and the motivations behind their actions. Hollis Skinner, a former student at Mt. Zion, and other members of the Mt. Zion CME Church are leading the way to preserve Mt. Zion. Though

the school does not have a current use, other than a storage facility for the worship center, the school has potential to be adaptively reused. How the school will be used, however, is up to the community. The community would also like to have the school listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Gibson County Training School/Polk-Clark Alumni Association, also known as the Mighty Milan Buffaloes, chartered in 1995, is preserving Polk-Clark. Their spokesperson is local researcher extraordinaire, Janice Williams. The alumni group is very well organized and collects yearly membership fees of \$10. Their main fundraising effort is “Laying the Path to Success...Brick by Brick.” People can buy and personalize a brick for \$60 to be laid near the National Register historical marker (Polk-Clark was placed in the National Register of Historic Places on March 12, 2012). The group’s goals are to promote education, promote student scholarships, support awareness, maintain the buildings and grounds, and to engage in the awarding of scholarship funds. They continue to strive to be representatives and spokespersons in the community, while providing guidance, counsel, and vision to the association staff and community; evaluating effectiveness of programs and services; building an organization that has significant impact and influence throughout the community; working closely with local schools to identify school, student, and alumni needs and pursue new initiatives in response to those needs.<sup>58</sup> Preservation is a by-product of these goals. As stated above, the school is currently used as the Milan Polk-Clark Enrichment Center. The organization

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<sup>58</sup> “Gibson County Training School-Polk Clark High School,” [www.gcts-pchs.com](http://www.gcts-pchs.com) (2015).

and passion of the alumni group is a testament to what community support can do for a historic site.

Hollis Skinner and other community members are also working on the preservation and adaptive reuse of Trenton Rosenwald School. Above all, the community wants the school to have a purpose. Skinner had proposed bringing a branch of a community college to the school, or at least having a community college institution use the building for some purpose. As stated in the previous chapter, Trenton Special School District has transferred ownership of the community center to Tennessee State University, which plans to use the school for university purposes, as well as community outreach and programming.

Sitka School alumni, led by Lucy Kimble, are working to preserve Sitka School. The school was only in operation for a relatively short amount of time compared to the other three schools. Therefore, the alumni group for this school is rather small. The alumni group feels passionately about the preservation of their school, and placing the school in the National Register of Historic Places. They want the school to have some kind of function for the patrons of Silas Dawson Memorial Park, though what that function will be is undetermined at this time. The group would like the school to serve as a lesson to younger generations of African Americans about segregated education and their educational heritage.

Preservation is part and parcel of how Americans participate in history making. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen found that Americans feel closest to the past when watching films, reading books, visiting museums, looking at photos, taking photos, sharing experiences at a reunion, investigating family history, working on hobbies or

collections, writing in a journal or diary, and taking part in a group interested in the past.<sup>59</sup> Americans turn to the past to build relationships and communities, and to make their history live in the present. They turn to the past to envision tomorrow, and to determine what legacies they want to leave behind.<sup>60</sup>

These preservation projects make clear the inherent value of working with communities to promote local history. As Lewis Mumford states, “to preserve these histories and to understand them is an important and indispensable step to understanding what is going on in the country at large.”<sup>61</sup> This thesis has highlighted the profound history of African American education in Gibson County, as well as the value of schoolhouses as material culture of segregated education in the South. The valuable work of these communities has shown how connecting history with public history can contribute to community-based preservation projects. The groups who are working to preserve these institutions are intimately involved with African American place-making in their communities, and are striving to remind us all that African American segregated schools are not without a history.

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<sup>59</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>61</sup> Lewis Mumford, “The Value of Local History,” in *The Pursuit of Local History: Readings on Theory and Practice*, ed. Carol Kammen (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1996), 88.

## CONCLUSION

“Like chimneys standing in the cold ashes of a tragic fire, the old school buildings endure in towns and rural communities across the southeastern United States...Beyond their weathered facades and boarded-up windows lies an important, hidden chapter in American history.”<sup>1</sup> –David S. Cecelski

Throughout this project, I have endeavored to shed light on what Cecelski calls a hidden chapter in American history. Though disparaging statistics may suggest the history of African American education is worth hiding, African American communities remember their schools as places of support and growth. The community-based preservation of Mt. Zion Negro School, Polk-Clark School, Trenton Rosenwald School, and Sitka School is a powerful testament to the value African American communities placed on their segregated schools.

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<sup>1</sup> David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 7.



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