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Black Schools Restored as Landmarks

By Erik Eckholm

**Article posted online Jan. 15, 2010, at
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/us/15schools.html>
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Columbia, S.C. -- Until 1923, the only school in the largely black farm settlement of Pine Grove was the one hand-built by parents, a drafty wooden structure in the churchyard. Anyone who could read and write could serve as teacher. With no desks and paper scarce, teachers used painted wood for a blackboard, and an open fireplace provided flashes of warmth to the lucky students who sat close.



The Pine Grove school in Columbia S.C., built in the 1920s with funding from the philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, is being restored as a landmark. Photograph by David Walter Banks for New York Times.

This changed after a Chicago philanthropist named Julius Rosenwald, the president of Sears, Roebuck, took up the cause of long-neglected education for blacks at the urging of Booker T. Washington, the proponent of black self-help. By the late 1920s, one in three rural black pupils in 15 states were attending a new school built with seed money, architectural advice and supplies from the Rosenwald Fund.

"It was a big step up, going to a school that was painted and had a potbellied stove," said Rubie Schumpert, 92, one of nine siblings who attended the Rosenwald school in Pine Grove -- and one of three sisters who went on to college and careers as teachers.

If the desks and textbooks were hand-me-downs from white schools, at least there were real blackboards and rough paper for writing. If there was still no electricity, columns of windows maximized the natural light.

Today, this hard-used wooden building, which narrowly escaped demolition, is one of several dozen Rosenwald schools being restored as landmarks -- newly appreciated relics of important chapters in philanthropy and black education. The schools were a turning point, sparking improved, if still unequal, education for much of the South, historians say.

The Smithsonian Institution's new National Museum of African-American History and Culture is acquiring desks and other artifacts, as well as oral histories, from another Rosenwald school in South Carolina, said Jacquelyn D. Serwer, chief curator.

Pine Grove's school was one of more than 5,000 built for rural blacks throughout the South between 1912 and 1937 with aid from Rosenwald. Spot surveys indicate that no more than 800 remain, their historical importance often unknown to residents and even to many of the dwindling alumni, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which calls the schools an endangered treasure.

The need for them reflected the segregation of the age and the paltry financing of black schools. But historians say their blossoming also demonstrated the strong community ties forged by rural blacks and a fierce determination to educate their children despite official indifference.

"We were on the verge of losing an important part of the American story," said Richard Moe, president of the National Trust, which during the last two years, with a \$2 million donation from Lowe's, has aided the renovation of 33 Rosenwald schools, including Pine Grove's, as museums or community centers. States and communities have identified scores more in dilapidated condition. [Read the full [article >>>](#)].