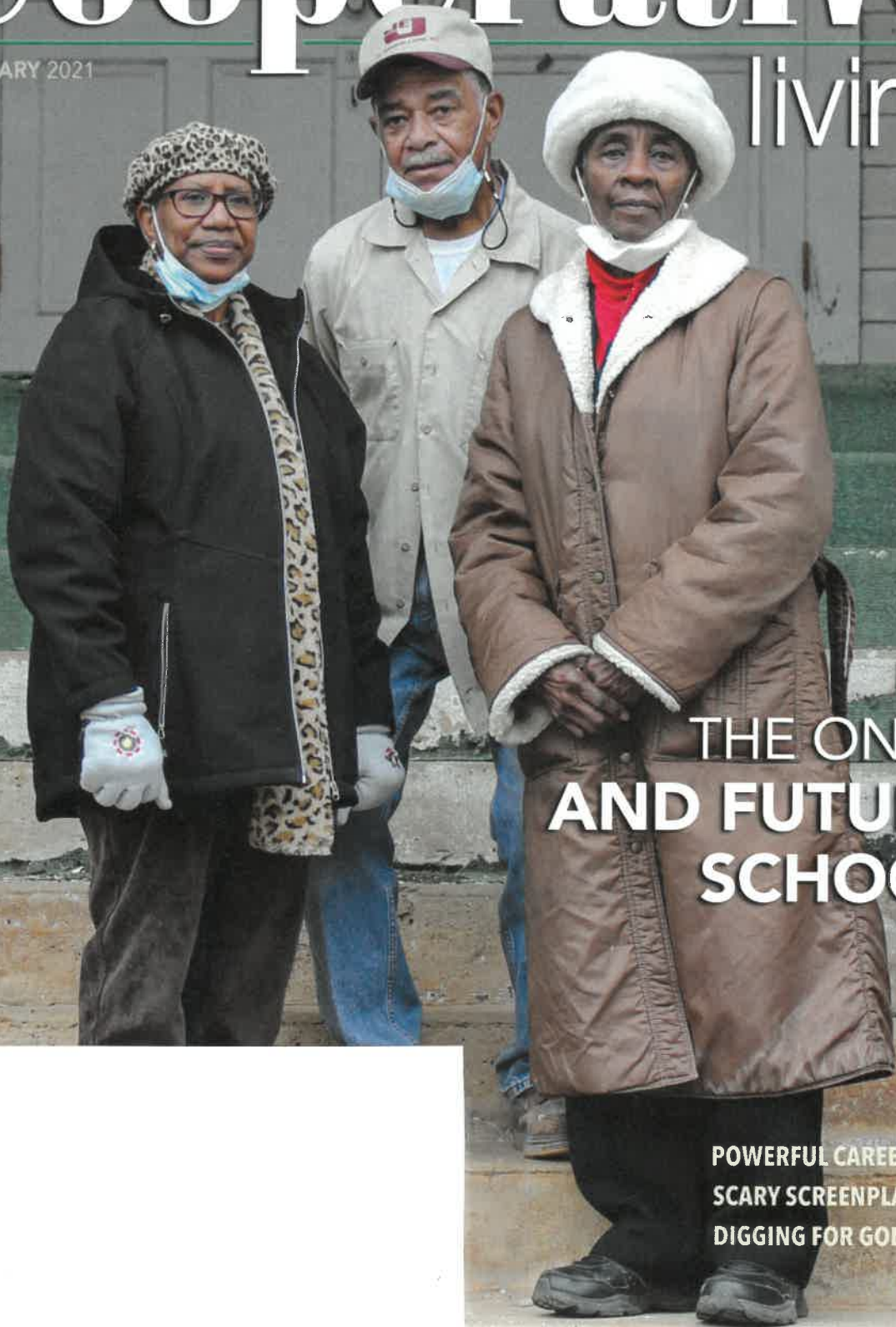


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REC News
on pg. 17!



THE ONCE AND FUTURE SCHOOL

PAGE 12

PLUS:

POWERFUL CAREERS, PG. 7

SCARY SCREENPLAY, PG. 10

DIGGING FOR GOLD, PG. 34



The School on the Hill

Achieving a vision for the future while respecting the past

After more than 60 years, Delores Nash-Hicks was back in fourth grade, and she could not have been more delighted.

Her old classroom in the Campbell County Training School Complex looked almost new, with freshly painted walls, gleaming hardwood floors and high-banked, reglazed windows that bathed photographs and mementoes in natural light.



Delores Nash-Hicks

Her memories were just as fresh. Departing before dawn on the long bus ride that would take her from the tiny community of New London, Va., to the school, set aside for Black education in the Jim Crow era. How students lined up to march through her classroom to the lunchroom to take once-a-year health pills. Walking up the hill to the privy. The woodstove that provided heat. The love of the teachers.

“I can’t explain it. It’s exhilarating. It’s happiness,” she says.

Nash-Hicks was returning to class — she’d swept the floor earlier in the day, like a dutiful student — as part of



PHOTOS BY LAURA EMERY

Some of the work has started on renovating the nearly century-old Campbell County Training School.

an ambitious, multi-year, multimillion-dollar effort to restore four buildings known as the School on the Hill in Rustburg, just outside of Lynchburg.

Built in the 1920s and 1930s, the structures are still-standing keepsakes of an initiative conceived by Booker T. Washington and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald to construct some 5,300 schools supported, partially financed, maintained and staffed by Black communities.

For Black students across the South, Rosenwald schools often represented the sole opportunity for education beyond sixth grade, emphasizing trades for males and domestic arts for females.

A century later, project organizers envision the school as a cultural, educational and historical facility. They foresee a variety of practical workshops and training, while incubator space will be available for startup businesses. A renovated assembly hall will host plays, concerts, lectures and other activities. A museum that tells the Rosenwald story is in progress.

“Those things from the past are very important,” says

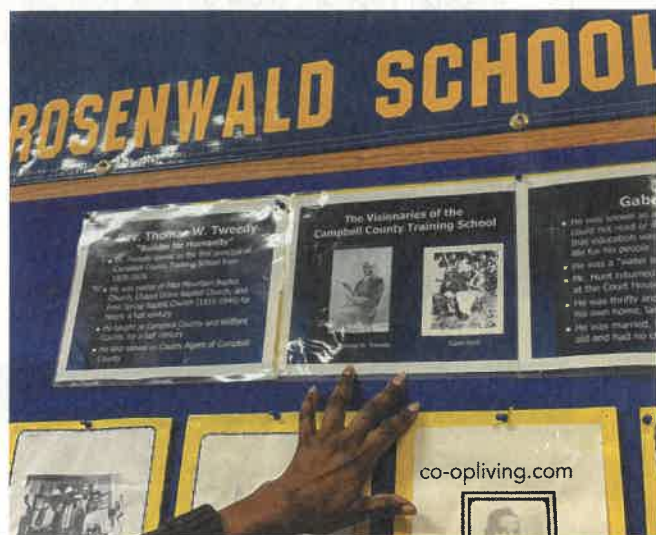
Delores Nash-Hicks points to the historic display that is now featured in the building where she once attended fourth grade.

Millicent Nash, president of the restoration project and a former student at the school. “But those things that we continue to work for are just as important.”

FORESIGHT OF SLAVES

Though he was born into slavery — and perhaps because of it — Thomas Tweedy had a vision of education. In the early 1920s, Tweedy and Gabe Hunt, another former slave, mortgaged their homes to come up with the match required for a Rosenwald school in Rustburg. The simple, four-classroom, four-teacher building cost \$7,500 — the Rosenwald fund contributed \$1,100, the community contribution was \$800, with the Campbell County School Board accounting for the rest.

Two years later, the school board spent \$200 to hire Tweedy as what it described as “colored agricultural



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Millicent Nash heads up the restoration project of a Black-only school she and her parents attended.

demonstration agent.” He later became the school’s first principal, in all spending a half-century in education.

By 1928, 16 Rosenwald schools had sprung up across Campbell County’s more than 500 square miles with African American communities raising nearly \$5,800 toward construction, according to data compiled by the National Park Service.

In every case, the school was more than a wood frame for rote learning, says the Rev. Allan Loving. He attended Leets School, a functional two-room building in the northern tip of the county, where several boys would light a fire in the woodstove for heat every morning while others walked a half-mile to a nearby spring to retrieve water for the school day.

“It was the centerpoint of the community. We would have our picnics and games and sometimes we would have lectures there from various officials in the county,” he says. “We loved the school because it was an opportunity to get off that tobacco farm.”

In the meantime, the school in Rustburg was expanding into the hub of the local Rosenwald network. The fund helped to finance a three-teacher annex, with a 5,000-square-foot auditorium coming to fruition around 1931.

Eventually, the school complex

consisted of seven buildings, including a two-room home economics cottage and a dormitory for teachers where Principal Clyde Scott resided. Four buildings remain today, and they are the focus of the renovation project.

“We are achievers,” Millicent Nash says. “And our part is to show our young people that they can be achievers as well. They’ve got that capability to become achievers.”



“It was the centerpoint of the community. We loved the school because it was an opportunity to get off that tobacco farm.”

– The Rev. Allan Loving

FOR THE LOVE OF LEARNING

The Black schools lacked what white public schools had. Student Sonja Dickerson recalls that parents organized festivals to raise funds for a simple overhead projector. Not until 1969, 15 years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled separate educational facilities were inherently unequal, did Campbell County schools fully integrate.

Yet, with the strong support system in school and at home, students from Campbell County look back on their education with fondness, not regret.

Case in point: Teachers used what resources they had at their disposal, even negative ones, to channel their students into productive ways of thinking. Maurice Darden attended a Rosenwald school in nearby

Southampton County, Va., and recalls slurs scribbled in the pages of old textbooks that white schools turned over to Black schools.

“Our teacher would want you to read the message, and it was a racial message, because that’s the way he wanted to get you more motivated. You had to read whatever that message was and then you had to think about it, then he would quiz you,” Darden says.

“The only reason we survived was because the teachers loved us.”

Corrinne Kinebrew, who attended assemblies at the training school, said her experience in Campbell County convinced her that education is more than just an overstuffed supply cabinet.

“Resources are not education,” she says. “When a person learns to read, write and reason, there is no limit to what they can do. There was a systemic effort to limit resources so that people would not learn to read, write and reason, because once you learn to do that, there’s very little that presents a challenge. And that has to do more with the community that you’re a part of.”

(continued on page 14)

The School on the Hill

(continued from page 13)

Campbell County students did not progress at equal rates. There are no official dropout statistics, but Loving remembers farmers driving to school in their pickups to retrieve boys for work in the fields. Many of them were part of sharecropper families and never returned for an education, he says.

“Those boys usually missed the first semester of the year because they had to help the father with the crops and so forth. The sharecropper, he could be fired because that’s the way he fed his family,” he says. “So it was survival. We were in survival mode.”

Even so, the memories of a first-class education for citizens treated mostly as second class are positive. Like her parents, Millicent Nash attended the training school and, as she walks through the buildings today, she can point out where she hung her coat as a first-grader and laid her head for an after-lunch nap.

“I felt we received a first-class education that allowed us to go on further,” she says. “Our job as young people was to go to school, get the best grades we could and do everything expected of us, and that was to learn.”

THE ONCE AND FUTURE SCHOOL

Inside the one-time training school auditorium, under freshly mounted crossbeams and dangling wires, Lorenzo Megginson was poring over blueprints. The four buildings on the grounds are well preserved, considering they are nearly 100 years old. But codes are more aggressive than they were in the 1920s and 1930s, and as a project manager, Megginson is navigating them during construction.

“They didn’t have the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act]. You’ve got to meet all of these standards,” he says. “It’s a lot that you didn’t have to worry about years ago.”



Lorenzo Megginson

Megginson was born into the Rosenwald heritage. A Campbell County Rosenwald school is named for his great-grandfather, Albert; it has since been annexed into the city of Lynchburg. He thought he was retired as a masonry specialist in 2010 until he hooked on with the renovation.

“Our goal was to get something done that was physical and visible. So we had to gut out the entire [auditorium] building one side at a time. I am retired but I have a full-time job,” he laughs. “I don’t know how I had time to work when I was working.”

After the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the training school was phased out, replaced by consolidated segregated schools. When the school system returned it to the county as surplus property, the board of supervisors directed the county administrator’s office to work with the local branch of NAACP to evaluate the property’s significance and value to the African American community.

In 2014, the NAACP developed an ad hoc committee to research the matter. It determined that the school was a historic Rosenwald school. The ad hoc committee became a legal entity intending to restore and develop the property for public use, and the county deeded the property to the Campbell County Training School Complex Committee in 2016.



When Nash-Hicks learned of the restoration committee, she jumped in with both feet to preserve a school that her mother and her seven brothers and sisters also attended. A former school system employee, she specializes in community history presentations and is the project’s historical archivist.

“The joke I tell everybody is they’re going to have to hurry up and finish so I can get married there and have my wedding reception,” she laughs.

Fundraisers and grants are helping to move the volunteer work along. Support has come from the Fray Family Trust and the Jamerson Family Trust.

Other support has come from the Greater Lynchburg Community Foundation and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, as well as continuous backing from the Campbell County administration and community partners.

The committee is working with Virginia Tech to finalize a conceptual site plan. In that way, Millicent Nash says the committee is fostering a more educated citizenry and working with community-based organizations — a modern version of what Washington and Rosenwald fought for 100 years ago.

“As we move into a different era, we want to cast a vision for the future,” she says. “It’s going to be phenomenal.” ■



► For more information, visit campbellcountytrainingschoolcomplex.org.

The Legacy of Rosenwald Schools

A story of persistence and dedication in Black education

Blackie might have been the first dog to be expelled from school. Maxine Nowlin's pup was a fixture curled up near the pot-bellied stove that heated a two-room schoolhouse in Courtland, Va., as a teacher taught Black students.

Until someone, probably a teacher, stepped on the dog one day. It growled, bared its teeth and earned permanent canine detention. "Blackie could not go to school with us anymore," Nowlin says with a laugh decades later. "But Blackie was a part of the educational process."

But until she attended a conference about 10 years ago, Nowlin did not realize that her classmates and Blackie were learning in a Rosenwald school, the gateway to Black education in the South and an eventual entry on the National Register of Historic Places.

"I had no earthly clue that it was a Rosenwald school," says Nowlin, a member of Courtland Town Council who runs an after-school program at the school, now a community center. "This is a fascinating part of history."

A STEP FORWARD

The Courtland School, which cost \$4,000, with the African American community contributing \$1,000, was one of 5,300 Rosenwald schools built between 1917 and 1932.

Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute, supplied the inspiration and Julius Rosenberg, president of Sears, Roebuck and Co. and a member of Tuskegee's board of trustees, supplied the financing, which local citizens and governing bodies had to match.

Rosenwald saw it "as an incentive for Southern states to meet their responsibility to provide decent public schools for Black children," according to Mary Hoffschwelle, a professor at Middle Tennessee State University and expert on the schools declared endangered in 2002 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Bureaus of freed slaves and churches

brought education to many communities after the Civil War. But Rosenwald schools were more sweeping in their scope — Hoffschwelle estimates they housed one-third of the South's rural Black schoolchildren and teachers by 1928.

"I don't think people understand that education for emancipated Black people's education was one of their top priorities. They just wanted to be educated and they wanted their children educated," says Sonja Ingram, field services manager for Preservation Virginia, a Richmond-based nonprofit. "The Rosenwald fund was really a shot in the arm to help with this."

Preservation Virginia has been painstakingly cataloguing Rosenwald schools in the state, working with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to identify where the schools were and what happened to them. Rosenwald schools have been located in 86 of Virginia's 95 counties and four independent cities.

The organization has developed an interactive map, subject to refinement, of the 382 school buildings in Virginia attributable to the Rosenwald project. Most have been demolished or fallen

(continued on page 16)



Maxine Nowlin's brother, Maurice Darden, is in this photograph of a classroom in the original Rosenwald school in Courtland, Va.

PHOTOS BY LAURA EMERY

A 1916 photo shows teachers and agent of Rosenwald schools. Robert Russa Morton, principal of Tuskegee Institute, is seated at center. A museum in Farmville, Va., is named for him.



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The Legacy of Rosenwald Schools

(continued from page 15)

apart. Eighty-three of the 126 still intact are in use, such as the Courtland building; the others are vacant, according to Preservation Virginia. In Maryland, 53 Rosenwald schools remain, Preservation Maryland says.

That should give impetus to preserving the remaining structures. Ingram notes that Caswell County, N.C., on the Virginia border, once had six Rosenwald schools.

“Not a single one is standing. You can go there and see the foundation. So, it’s not that somebody tore it down to build another house. They just don’t exist,” Ingram says. “I always wondered about that because there’s so much that you can take from these schools and learn from.”

SCHOOL DAYS

The schools were very specific in their design. The program required a minimum of 2 acres for a campus Hoffschwelle says, with room for a shop for boys and a home for teachers. They

incorporated modern lighting and ventilation, and were designed to be constructed easily, almost a chain-

restaurant

style but with a much greater purpose. Additionally, one of the hallmarks of a Rosenwald school was classification by the number of teachers, not rooms. In Virginia, about half of the buildings were two-teacher schools, Preservation Virginia found. That might translate into one teacher for grades 1 through 3 and another for grades 4 to 7.

While it sounds like a mishmash, Maurice Darden, Nowlin’s older brother, says it worked well at the Courtland school he attended.



“The marker honors those who worked to ensure our community’s children were educated,” says Maxine Nowlin.

“The beauty of the Rosenwald school back in those times is suppose you were in the fourth grade but you were pretty smart. You could actually learn every lesson from the person who was assigned to the seventh grade,” he says.

“Suppose you were in the seventh grade and you had missed some stuff in the fourth and fifth grades — the mother got sick or maybe you had to work on the farm. You had an instant review because by sitting there and basically everybody sitting beside in the same room, it was always a review process.”

Equally important, and something that today’s schoolkids would blanch at — grooming and inspection. Students had to show their fingernails, their hair and their ears. If you didn’t pass muster, you were reported to the whole class.

“We got the first-class nurturing from the teachers in the community and that’s the thing that we don’t have now,” Darden says. “We don’t have the nurturing that we used to have. We couldn’t afford to fail.”

early 1960s when nearby Prince Edward shut down its system rather than integrate.

“The school sat empty a lot,” Trent says. “We’ve come a long way but we’re still working on it.”

On Virginia’s Eastern Shore, the Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative has purchased a circa-1928 elementary school with the intention of rehabbing it. In Cumberland County, Va., residents are trying to fend off a mega-landfill that would be located near the site of a Rosenwald school.

By now, it’s familiar knowledge to Nowlin. She learned about her school’s history late in life; now she is passing it on to the next generation.

“The only way they’re going to know about our legacy, our history, is that we have to tell them,” she says. “If you don’t know about where you came from, how would you know where you’re going?” ■

PHOTO COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Julius Rosenwald



PRESERVATION VIRGINIA

Per Fisk University’s archives, 382 Rosenwald-funded schools and auxiliary buildings were built in Virginia between 1917 and 1932.

- 366 of these buildings were schools
- 4 were teacher cottages
- 12 were additional classroom space called “shops” at county training schools
- 33% stand (126)
- 67% are demolished (256)
- 51% were two-teacher schools
- 20% were one-teacher schools
- 13% were three-teacher schools
- The 5,000th Rosenwald school built in the country was the Greenbrier School in Hampton, Va.

▶ For more, visit preservationvirginia.org and preservationmaryland.org and search for Rosenwald.