Tennessee’s Oldest Rosenwald School

The Walter Brewer Bemis Community Center was first known as the West Bemis Rosenwald School. Constructed in 1916, the building is Tennessee’s oldest remaining Rosenwald school. From 1912 to 1932, the Julius Rosenwald Fund provided grants and architectural plans for the construction of African American schools in the South, provided that the local black community contributed substantial support, along with funding from the local white-controlled school board.

The program began as a partnership between Rosenwald, the head of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, and Booker T. Washington, the head of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The program began in Alabama, but after Washington’s death in 1915, Rosenwald continued to expand the school building effort across the South. By the time the program ended during the Great Depression, over 5,000 buildings for African American education had been constructed.
Building a Rosenwald School at Bemis

The Bemis Brothers Bag Company created the town of Bemis in the first decade of the twentieth century to serve as a company town for its cotton mill employees. The company followed the segregation policies of Jim Crow in Tennessee and designated a separate part of the village plan for African American housing.

After the local Cane Creek school for African Americans burned in about 1915, company officials donated the land for a new school on the edge of the village’s segregated African American neighborhood. The local government provided $1,500, the African American community raised an additional $1,500, and the Rosenwald Fund granted $400 for the school’s construction. The building followed plans developed by Tuskegee professor Clinton J. Calloway, who was a native of Tennessee and a graduate of Fisk University.
As intended by its planners from Tuskegee Institute, the West Bemis Rosenwald School continued to be a focus for the community of African American mill workers and their families. In the Jim Crow South, places like this school became safe havens where African Americans could celebrate their families and community in an era of often-brutal public segregation practices.

In the 1960–61 school year, county officials moved Bemis students to the Spann-Rosenwald School and closed the West Bemis Rosenwald School. West Bemis Missionary Baptist Church acquired the building and converted it into a church with offices, Sunday School classrooms, and a fellowship hall.
Restoration and New Futures

In 1991, the school was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Bemis Historic District designation. The West Bemis Missionary Baptist Church congregation worshipped here until completing a new church building in 2001. Other churches used the building until 2008, when the local effort began to establish the Walter Brewer Bemis Community Center.

The Walter Brewer Bemis Community Center seeks to provide a safe, culturally stimulating place for young people and seniors in the community, while also serving as a center for the entire community through educational, cultural, and recreational programming.