Sitka School
Milan, Tennessee
Gibson County

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Sitka School in Milan, Tennessee, is like many other rural schoolhouses across the South. Influenced by Rosenwald design, it was constructed with the help of the Public Works Administration (PWA) and the local African American community. Sitka School is exceptional, however, for the place it holds in the African American educational heritage of Gibson County. Elgin L. Klugh has helped us to understand the desire for African Americans to not only preserve their schools, but also to ensure that these spaces will continue to be used for community benefit:

“African American school communities were overwhelmingly reliant on community initiative and collective action. Thus, these schools developed as community institutions where community members could focus their collective energies toward common goal—they could ‘invest in each other’ and actively create ‘palpable resources’ to improve their lives. And since these schoolhouses were community institutions in which everyone had a vested interest, they reinforced the educational and communal values that facilitated their construction.”

Segregation era schools, like Sitka School, are still valued by African American communities because of the legacy of dedication and sacrifice they represent. Sitka School helps to contribute to Milan’s sense of place, purpose, and identity.

Work with Sitka School began before Fall 2014, but my work with Sitka began in September 2014. This report by no means is the end. In fact, it is only the beginning. This report will serve as the foundation for work with Sitka School and the community, which will continue to grow as I develop the history of the school, as well as its students, as part of my Master’s thesis.

Gibson County: A Brief Overview

Carrie Booker Seat’s thesis, “A History of the Development of County Public Schools for Negroes in Gibson County Tennessee From 1931 Through 1950” is an invaluable document which has recorded much of the pertinent information related to Gibson County African
American education in the first half of the twentieth century. Ms. Seat made for a perfect author of such a thesis as she was the Jeanes Fund supervisor for Gibson County at this time. In 1940, the last date for which census data is available before Sitka School opened, Gibson County’s African American population numbered 9,221, 20.6% of Gibson County’s total population. The overwhelming majority of African Americans were employed as farmers, farm managers, proprietors, etc. The second largest group was comprised of farm wage workers. These numbers paint a picture of a county dominated by agriculture. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, African American enrollment for children between the ages of five and nineteen hovered just above 75%. Attendance of those students enrolled in school ranged from 83% to 93%, respectively. In the 1940s, the highest number of students enrolled were predominantly first graders.ii

A clear shift in teaching and educational standards for African Americans can also be seen in the 1940s, as beginning in Academic Year 1939-1940, African American teachers who obtained less than a high school education were no longer teaching in the classroom. At one time, there were as many as eleven African American teachers educating without a high school degree, no doubt a reflection of the opportunities afforded to them at the time. An average teacher in African American schools in Gibson County taught an average of 29 students during a given school year, an average ten pupil decrease from the 1930s given a higher number of educators.iii By 1940, 79.7% of African American schools in eight states across the South and Washington, D.C were one-teacher and two-teacher structures (52.8% one-teacher; 26.9% two-teacher).iv Sitka School would add to these two-teacher schoolhouses in 1942.

Sitka School: What We Know

The origin of the name Sitka lies with the Illinois Central Railroad, who chose the town in 1873 as a siding for its trains between Jackson, Tennessee and Fulton, Kentucky. Sitka was
chosen because the name was concise and did not appear on any maps.\textsuperscript{v} Sitka School, located in School District I, was constructed in 1942 in a joint effort between the federal government and the Sitka community. It hosted first through eighth grade students, first through fourth in one room, fifth through eighth in the other. Teachers included a Ms. Jennie (last name unknown), Ms. Lila Ceats, and Mr. John Woods. Vern and Elenor Gray were substitute teachers. Thelma Barksdale, later Thelma Roberson, acted as Sitka School principal.\textsuperscript{vi} The Barksdale family is representative of the advancement of many African American families across the South. Ms. Barksdale’s grandparents, Henderson and Eliza Barksdale, were born into slavery and raised nine surviving children.\textsuperscript{vii} Among their children was Dallas “Dalie” Barksdale. He and his wife Vinnie (or Vennie) had four children: Bertha, Crinner, DT, and Thelma. Descendent from formerly enslaved grandparents, born to a father who was self employed and could read and write, Thelma Barksdale’s family unit shows the progression and new opportunity for African Americans.\textsuperscript{viii}

According to Sitka community members, the school closed some time in the 1950s. In 1967, the Gibson County Board of Education approved the school for continued use as a community center.\textsuperscript{ix} In 1991, Sitka School and the surround land became Silas Dawson Memorial Park thanks to the efforts of the Sitka Community Club.\textsuperscript{x} Silas Dawson Memorial Park, and therefore Sitka School, is still public property.\textsuperscript{xi}

The Influence of Rosenwald Design

The Rosenwald building program contributed to the construction of over 5,000 schools across the nation between 1912 and 1932. By the time the Julius Rosenwald Fund gave its last dollar, one in every five schools in the South was a “Rosenwald school.”\textsuperscript{xii} Though Sitka School
is not a Rosenwald school, the influence of Community School Plans can be seen in almost every aspect of Sitka’s construction.

Sitka School is a two-teacher schoolhouse with a partition, situated North/South similar to Floor Plan 20-A. Though Sitka School does not have a prominent porch, cloak room, or industrial room, it does have a bank of eight, double hung windows allowing for Western light, breeze windows, and wainscoating.

**Structural Overview**

Better comparison can be made to Rosenwald design by looking Sitka School’s elements of construction and orientation. Sitka School rests on a two-acre rectangular plot, closest to the Northwest corner. Situating a school in this manner is also consistent with Community School Plans. 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.

**North Façade**

The Northern elevation faces Napoleon Luter Rd. This vantage point provides a good look at the school’s gable roof and horizontal weatherboarding. The Silas Dawson Memorial Park sign that once greeted visitors upon arrival is no longer extant, and its whereabouts are unknown.
East Façade

The Eastern elevation still retains one of its character defining features: the Stika 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. The school also has sheet metal roofing with dentils.

South Façade

The Southern elevation is almost identical to the Northern elevation. However, the Southern elevation shows evidence of weather damage where the roof is being stripped from the structure.
West Façade

The Western elevation is the façade that most closely resembles Rosenwald design. This elevation has a bank of eight, nine-over-nine, double hung sash windows. Few glass panes remain intact. These windows are another element of Sitka School’s character defining features. This angle also shows another look at the weather damage to the South façade.

Interior

The interior shows tri-tone painting with wainscoating 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.
**Damage Assessment**

The damage seen here in the Southeast corner of the school 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 causing the wood to deteriorate.

The school’s broken windows (on the Western elevation) are problematic as well because it leaves the building susceptible to weather and intruders (human and otherwise).

**Restroom/Outhouse**

The current restroom replaced the school’s outhouse whenever the park was created. Even though the 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.\(^{xv}\)
It is clear that former Sitka School students and Sitka community members have a passion for the preservation of their school. Many other African American communities across the South have exhibited this same desire to protect their educational heritage through preservation. Through the process of desegregation, many African American communities sacrificed their community institutions and their jobs as their children moved to white schools. The impacts of desegregation can still be felt today. As a result of desegregation, African American students sacrificed their schooling based on community values. Startling statistics show that African American students continued to struggle in segregated schools well into the twentieth century.

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.” National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAP) data also showed that only 20% of African American students in the eleventh grade could perform complex reading tasks. The average SAT verbal score for African American students was over 100 points lower than other test takers: 337 compared to 467. In addition, “one-half of African American students who were sophomores in 1980 had dropped out or graduated ‘high-risk’ by 1984.” In 1980, African American teachers represented 12% of the teaching population. As of 2006, that number has been cut in half to 6%.

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.” In 2006, the average white student attended a school that was 80% 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 25% of poor and black students will achieve NAEP proficiency in reading, and less than 50% will achieve proficiency in mathematics.”

Prior to desegregation, the African American community was an essential component to a child’s success. Desegregation diluted communities’ generation-long struggle for education. The former students of Sitka School have recognized this change in African American education and are working to ensure that a piece of their educational heritage is not lost. Sitka School, like many rural, southern, African American schools, was the result of a community’s desire for betterment. There is an inherent struggle, however, in researching rural African American communities. Their accomplishments and milestones are often absent from the archive. Further research on Sitka School will entail oral histories with community members, and a deeper look into Gibson County’s educational history.
Endnotes


iii Ibid.


vi Sitka School students, interview by author.

vii 1900 United States Federal Census.

viii 1920 United States Federal Census.


x Unknown newspaper, courtesy of Janice Williams.

xi State of Tennessee, Comptroller of the Treasury: Real Estate Assessment Data.


xiv Ibid., 2.

xv Ibid., 22.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., 301.