Education in Rural West Tennessee:  
A Study of Three African American Schools

May 2014  
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Seminar in Historic Preservation Spring 2014  
MTSU Center for Historic Preservation  
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Project Background and Introduction

Work with Mt. Zion Negro School (Mt. Zion) and Trenton Rosenwald School (TRS) began in October 2013 when Mr. Hollis Skinner, graduate of Mt. Zion and TRS, contacted the Center for Historic Preservation (CHP). After becoming familiar with the Center’s work with Polk-Clark High School in Milan, Tennessee, Mr. Skinner requested that several sites in Gibson County be evaluated for inclusion on the National Registry of Historic Places. Influenced by progressive steps being taken in California where he and his wife lived for over twenty-five years, Mr. Skinner is a strong advocate for preserving historic structures important to the local African American community. After reviewing a packet of information sent by Mr. Skinner, the Center decided to move forward with a site visit.

In November 2013, Director, Dr. Carroll Van West, Assistant Director, Dr. Rachel Martin, and Fieldwork Coordinator, Katie Randall made the initial trip which included three properties. First the group toured the First Baptist Church at 201 North High Street. Then at Trenton Rosenwald School the CHP staff was welcomed with banners, signs, refreshments, alumni and government officials. The CHP staff participated in a short program before leaving for Bradford to tour Mt. Zion Negro School where a small welcome party was also gathered there along with members of the press.

As part of the spring 2014 Seminar in Historic Preservation, Amanda Barry and Denise Gallagher agreed to take on the Gibson County schools as well as an additional school in Haywood County. In February, Dr. West led a second site visit that included exploring the back roads of Gibson County. Mr. Skinner once again greeted the group and explained the history of Mt. Zion. Ms. Barry and Ms. Gallagher investigated the one room school house along with the nearby cemetery and well pump. Next the group drove ten miles to Trenton in order to visit Trenton Rosenwald School located on East Second Street. After a stop for lunch at Cotton’s Café, the group traveled to Brownsville, Tennessee to visit the West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center and the Flagg Grove School.
Yellow icon: Mt. Zion Negro School—Bradford
Red icon: Trenton Rosenwald School—Trenton
Teal icons: Flagg Grove School—Brownsville (The light teal icon indicates the original location near Nutbush and dark teal icon shows the school’s current location near I-40 in Brownsville.)
Ms. Sonia Outlaw-Clark, director of the West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center, explained that the Flagg Grove School is a long term project involving the relocation and interpretation of one of Haywood County’s few remaining African American schoolhouses. Over $75,000 was raised to transport the school from a farm near Nutbush, Tennessee to the parking lot of the Heritage Center. The school is very important to the community because of its connection to Haywood County native and internationally renowned entertainer, Tina Turner. As a child growing up in the Nutbush Community, Tina Turner attended the school and her ancestors helped in its initial founding.

As part of the Flagg Grove project Tina Turner arranged for her own designers based out of New York City to create a museum quality display of her costumes, awards, and memorabilia. Ms. Outlaw-Clark contacted the CHP because she felt strongly that the broader history of rural schools, including teachers and students, should also be included in the installation. After the initial site visit, it became clear that the main challenge would be to integrate historical panels into the overall design.

The projects in Gibson County are at the beginning stage of the research process with the end-goal being placement of the schools on the National Register of Historic Places. Work this semester was focused on researching the necessary information to complete the Tennessee Historical Commission (THC) National Register of Historic Places Information Packet for Mt. Zion and Trenton Rosenwald School. The THC will then make a preliminary determination of eligibility. The Center for Historic Preservation will also provide preliminary historical information and preservation findings to the stakeholders in order to determine the appropriate next steps.

The Haywood County project also involves historical research but the end goal is much different. Preservation of the school has been achieved by moving it to the West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center. A third site visit in April 2014 involving Ms. Gallagher, Katie Randall, and CHP Program Manager, Antoinette Van Zelm provided much needed clarification related to the installation. The New York design team was on site and made final decisions about the placement of the historical panels. It was determined that the CHP would produce four narrow panels to be installed in one of the glass cases. Also of note—in the intervening months, the Flagg Grove School had been significantly altered including the installation of wall paneling (both original and salvaged), new entry and exit doors, and new windows. Because the school’s
original agricultural context is lost, the design team plan to recreate the rural setting using photographic images applied to the windows. Visitors will experience Tina Turner memorabilia and also be transported to the rural setting of a one-room school house.

All three schools were established by African American communities that viewed education as a path to equal citizenship and prosperity. While valuable historical data has already been collected from preliminary research and site visits, much more information will likely be generated from the community members themselves. Oral histories from residents, teachers, and students would provide much of the missing social and cultural history and would help place the three schools in the broader context of Tennessee’s segregated education system. Plans must also be made concerning the physical preservation and future uses of the Mt. Zion and Trenton schools in Gibson County. How will the structures be best utilized? The preservation of these buildings will depend on a successful plan for adaptive reuse.
Mt. Zion Negro School

Introduction

Mt. Zion Negro School is a one room school house on a one-acre lot adjacent to the Mt. Zion Worship Center located at 30 Mt. Zion Rd, Bradford, Tennessee. The property includes a community cemetery with the oldest headstones dating to 1870s.

History

With increasing urbanization of surroundings and the lack of need for rural schools, it is remarkable that Mt. Zion Negro School has survived destruction. One of the most challenging aspects of researching Mt. Zion Negro School, or the Old Mount Zion as it is known in Bradford, is that it is largely absent from the documentary record. Large numbers of rural schoolhouses were established in the post-bellum South and often without the financial assistance of the Freedmen’s Bureau. However, the evidence that does exist makes for a compelling story with many opportunities for community members to contribute to the narrative and further investigations to fill in the missing information.

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 $5.00 dollars.\(^1\) 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

\(^1\) 1855 Deed. Courtesy of Hollis Skinner. (See Appendix).
appear on the same roll in the 1860 Agricultural Census.² The deed dictated that the land deeded was for the establishment of “Mount Zion meeting house.” Use of this language is not surprising as “meeting house” could mean a church or school. Both uses are equally plausible as the grounds now host the school and Mt. Zion CME Church. With the deed dating 1855, however, it is doubtful that the meeting house was used by African Americans. Nineteenth-century law prohibited the official gathering of African Americans without a white person present. As the men in the deed were likely to have been neighbors, it is possible that this meeting house could have been the establishment of a splinter church or a school for their children.

Tradition states that this rural school was established in 1870 by “freed slaves.” How did this land come to change hands between white, landowning farmers to African Americans? The answer for this transition is unknown at this time. Perhaps the white farmers abandoned the property in search of a better location and facility. The grounds are now owned and administered by the Mt. Zion Worship Center.³ It is also unclear whether “freed slaves” is meant to describe African Americans who were freed before the Civil War or part of the greater emancipation. Whatever the case, there are a number of factors that indicate a possible construction date or period.

Dr. West’s investigations revealed that the floorboards of the schoolhouse were 3.5 inches in width. This measurement indicates an early twentieth-century construction. Construction of the building almost certainly occurred after the 1870 establishment date. Though the 3.5 inch floorboards suggest twentieth-century construction of the current structure, a knotted log foundation suggests the current structure could have been built upon an older one.

² 1850 United States Population Census.
1860 United States Population Census.
1860 United States Agricultural Census.

³ State of Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury: Real Estate Assessment Data.
www.assessment.state.tn.us.
The work of historian Frederick M. Culp also helped to narrow the construction date. Culp’s *Gibson County Past and Present* revealed that in 1915, Mt. Zion had one teacher and hosted Grades 1-6.\(^4\) Mt. Zion was one of seventy-two separate schools in the county at that time. Considering the number of rural schools within the county, the possibility of the school being a private institution, and its potential establishment as a church construction of Mt. Zion could have gone undocumented. Former enslaved African Americans established many schools outside the reach of the Freedmen’s Bureau and often "exercised their preference for black-controlled private schools."\(^5\)

Though the school is listed in 1915 as hosting Grades 1-6, children beyond the age of elementary school children attended Mt. Zion. Photographic evidence from 1925 suggests that possible ages could range from four or five to teenagers. The last class to leave Mt. Zion was the class of 1962. Its legacy lives on in the stories of Gibson County community members and has a rich history still yet untapped.


Structural Overview

This schoolhouse, historically and currently, is a one-room one-story building. It is of wood frame construction and is covered by a metal gable roof. The exterior wall covering is weatherboard and the interior is lined by wood paneling. The schoolhouse has a rectangular floor plan with dimensions measuring 35.2 feet long by 19.3 feet wide. The schoolhouse has six, four over one sash windows. Original interior features include a chalkboard and stovepipe. Historically, the schoolhouse had an entrance porch adjacent to the entryway. The porch has since been removed. The structure’s threats include neglect and weather.

Preservation Needs and General Recommendations

This section is meant to briefly assess the immediate and long-term preservation issues facing Mt. Zion. This assessment will in no way be the final say on these issues and how they are to be corrected. This is a broad overview of issues in general and specific recommendations will be addressed at a later date. Combating these issues will take time. It is important to remember that preservation is a process and will take place over an extended period of time.
Immediate Issues: Security and Cosmetic Maintenance

Windows are one of the main ways a building maintains its historic appearance. The current security and cosmetic maintenance issues stem primarily from the broken windows. When intact, they provide a barrier between the outside weather elements and intruders (be they human or otherwise).

Temperature variation, wind and rain all threaten the integrity of the structure’s interior. All openings should be sealed with plywood in the least damaging manner possible with particular attention paid to ensuring that the entire window is covered. This includes the window frames and all remaining panes. This will reinstate the barrier making it more difficult for wildlife to enter the building. These animals initiate decay mechanisms while possibly creating nests and/or further damaging surface finishes. The interior and exterior of the structure should still be cleared of all debris. If possible, the structure should no longer act as a storage space for the church.
Long-Term Issues

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 is also allowing for wasps and dirt dobbers to build their nests within the empty spaces.

Concrete Supports

The concrete supports also appear to be shifting. A more stable support system for the building will need to be constructed.
Because of the porous nature of masonry, it is easy for bricks to be damaged by moisture. As a result, the brick chimney is deteriorating. The chimney will need to be rebuilt and sealed to prevent further moisture damage.

Insects and other pests use wood as not only a food source, but also a nesting place. These insects bore holes into the wood and weaken the structure. This is an issue compromising the wood at the base of the building will also need to be addressed.
Further Recommendations and Areas of Research

While work has begun to place Mt. Zion on the National Register of Historic Places, a plan needs to be created to address the overall preservation of building. A preservation strategy will ensure that the building can be repurposed for future use. Mt. Zion also needs a master interpretive plan in place to determine the function of the schoolhouse once preservation needs have been met. The plan should make sure that the history and value of the schoolhouse could be communicated to the community as well as to others who would visit the property. Most of the history and value of the school will not come from information discovered by the Center for Historic Preservation, but from the community themselves. There are still many graduates of Mt. Zion residing in Gibson County who will be a wealth of information. Oral histories with the Bradford community will be invaluable in gathering more research and making decisions for the future of Mt. Zion. The role of the community past and present is central to the success of Mt. Zion. The community should also support general awareness of the site. Media coverage of the CHP’s visits to the site is extensive, but still largely within the local area. In the digital age, social media is key in promoting a message or a site. This promotion will also lead to fundraising opportunities. Preservation is an expensive endeavor and the community itself should not have to face that financial burden alone.

There are numerous grants available at the state and national level:

- The National Trust for Historic Preservation: http://www.preservationnation.org/resources/find-funding/
- The National Endowment for the Humanities: http://www.neh.gov/grants
- The National Park Service’s State, Tribal and Local Plans and Grants: http://www.nps.gov/history/hpg
- Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation: https://www.tn.gov/environment/history/history_preservation-grants.shtml
- Preservation Directory also lists multiple sources of funding: http://www.preservationdirectory.com/PreservationGeneralResources/GrantsFundingSources.aspx

This property is also prime for further research. The church itself, Mt. Zion CME Church, was also established (perhaps they were the same entity) in 1870 and has its own history. Many of the church members are also buried in the adjacent cemetery with gravestones dating back to the nineteenth-century. Another interesting property feature is the well water hand pump made by the Deming, Co. The 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 split,
the industry became the Deming, Co. in 1890. John Deming is an interesting character because he identified with the anti-slavery movement throughout his life. He was also a good friend of Sojourner Truth.\(^6\) Knowing this information, could the instillation of a Deming pump next to an African American school mean something more? Is the instillation of the pump a mere coincidence? It is certainly an inquiry worthy of pursuit.

Trenton Rosenwald School

Introduction

The Trenton Community Resource Center, historically known as the Trenton Rosenwald School (TRS), is located at 421 East 2nd Street near Trenton’s courthouse square. TRS is a large brick complex currently owned by Trenton Special School District. A portion of the facility is renovated and rented by Tennessee State University for a Head Start program. Dyersburg State Community College also rents space for the Gibson County Adult Education Center. Aside from an additional tenant teaching Karate, most of the building is currently underutilized or empty.

South façade, Trenton Rosenwald School

The school is comprised of multiple wings connected by narrow hyphens. The 5.8 acre parcel is surrounded on three sides by an established residential neighborhood and on one side by agricultural fields. The main entrance of the school faces south and is accessed from East 2nd Street. The parking lot and gymnasium are located in the rear of the school and can be accessed from East 1st Street. The upper northeast portion of the property is flat, low-lying fields suitable for sports activities. An asphalt basketball court is located at the south east corner.
History

Constructed c. 1928 the original TRS was a one-story, brick, eight-classroom school constructed on land donated by the Mann Chapman family. The African American community named the school Trenton Rosenwald in honor of The Rosenwald Fund, a philanthropic organization founded by Sears, Roebuck and Company CEO Julius Rosenwald that greatly expanded African American education throughout the South. The program created a cooperative agreement between local governments and black and white citizens to fund the construction of over five thousand schools for black children.

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7 Trenton Rosenwald Middle School Website. http://trms.trentonssd.org/
The Rosenwald Fund originated from a meeting between Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington in 1912. The early schools tended to be one or two room structures built near a church or agricultural field. In 1920, the school building initiative moved from Tuskegee to Nashville. In 1924 a new set of plans for schools was published as “Community School Plans.” Toward the end of the 1920s, the demand for educational facilities caused the Rosenwald Fund to shift gears and start building larger schools with the intention of offering high school level classes. Between 1928 and 1929, the Rosenwald Fund contributed to the construction of twenty-two schools in Tennessee—six were over seven-classroom in size.

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9 Fisk University Rosenwald Fund Card Database. http://rosenwald.fisk.edu/
The influence and success of the Rosenwald Fund cannot be overstated; however the agency never fully funded the construction of African American schools. The program was designed to incentivized local African American communities by providing a matching grant for typically less than twenty percent of the total school budget. Fisk University archives indicate that the total budget for TRS was $14,600. The local African American community contributed ten percent ($1,500), the Rosenwald fund contributed fifteen percent ($2,100), and the remaining seventy-five percent ($11,000) came from public sources.
For over two decades TRS functioned as part of the segregated public education system. TRS offered grades 1st through 8th and served as a feeder school to the only Gibson County high school for blacks located twelve miles away in Milan. Students could pay $1.00 to $2.00 a month for bus transportation to attend high school.10 State Department of Education records from 1939-1942 reveal that the school evolved from five teachers offering class for eight months to six teachers teaching for nine months. During this time the student body was around 200 students. Performance assessments indicate that the school suffered from staff turnover, lack of parental involvement, poor community health, under funding, and physical disrepair. The school’s strengths were considered to be the outstanding music department which supported a glee club and rhythm band.11 For many students, passing the county-wide eighth grade exam was as much education as they would receive before entering the work force either on a farm or in a factory.

From 1930 to 1950 Trenton’s population grew over thirty percent as part of a regional trend of rural farmers migrating to industrial centers. To meet the demand for high school instruction, TRS likely expanded to include grades 9th through 12th sometime after World War II. During this time the county did not provide bus transportation, however rural high school students were able to commute to Trenton instead of Milan. For example, high school students from Dyer, Tennessee located eight miles away caught a ride with adults working in Trenton or if they could afford it, took a small train called “the dinky”.12 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.13


11 Tennesse Department of Education Records, 1874-1984, Record Group 273, Box 94, Folder 8. Tennessee State Library & Archives, Nashville, TN.


13 Ibid., 164-65
In early 1953, TRS was destroyed by fire. Local newspapers indicate that the Federal Security Agency 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.”\(^\text{14}\) Although the county school board moved forward without delay, they neglected to expand size of the already crowded school.

![Trenton Rosenwald School Faculty. Photo Credit: Gibscene published 1953.](image)

In 1954 the United States Supreme Court case *Brown V. Board of Education* outlawed segregated schools and called for the gradual integration of public schools. Immediately following the completion of the new school, it is likely that the Gibson County School System added more classrooms, laboratories and other amenities to TRS in order to match the facilities available at the local white schools. Black public schools across the south received various additions, as local white school boards aimed to avoid integration by attempting to rectify “separate but equal” facilities for white and black students.

Mr. Hollis Skinner (graduating class of 1959) entered TRS in 1955 and maintains that the size of the school today is the same as when he was a student. The Supreme Court decision likely provided much needed busing for students from rural communities. Mr. Skinner indicated that he

\(^\text{14}\) *The Herald-Register*, February 12, 1953.
rode the bus for two hours each way from his home near Bradford, Tennessee which was located within the designated twenty-five mile radius. At this time TRS supported boys and girls basketball (football was discontinued after the fire), glee club, building trades, typing and business courses, and home economics.

In Trenton, a decade after the Brown decision, school segregation was still in effect due to a strategy called “freedom of choice” plans that encouraged residents to choose where to send their children. Under court order to desegregate, TRS’s last graduating class of seniors was in 1968. After this year, grades 9th through 12th were transferred to Trenton’s white school, Peabody High School. It is probable that the elementary grades were also transferred, because TRS once again became a middle school, however this time both white and black students attended. The local school board changed the name from Trenton Rosenwald School to Trenton Middle School. The name change was fiercely opposed by the African American community.

Mr. Robert L. Radford, a former basketball coach (1932-1942) said the following:

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 belong 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.

In 1996, Trenton Rosenwald Middle School was moved to a new building located at 2065 Highway 25 Bypass. The Rosenwald name was kept and the current school’s pedigree links back to the original 1928 Rosenwald School. Trenton Rosenwald Middle School currently serves approximately 430 students in grades 5th through 8th. Since the new school opened, old facility on East Second Street has been largely vacant with the exception of a Head Start daycare and some local business rental.

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Structural Overview
EXTERIOR

The Trenton Rosenwald School in its current form is a large complex of four main buildings connected by narrow, single-story brick hyphens or walkways. The entire complex features red brick exterior, concrete block foundation and has a flat roof. 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. Air conditioner units have been installed in many of the windows.

The south façade contains the school’s original main entrance which is surrounded by an oversized square brick pediment arranged in a striking stack bond. The entrance is recessed with a pair of single-light commercial entry doors flanked by two-light side lights and a six-light glass transom. The front entrance bay protrudes forward from the rest of the building and contains a pair of five-light hopper windows on either side of the entry.

Extending east and west from the main entrance are classrooms that each features a large bay of six, five-light metal hopper windows. Similar windows are installed on the north façade and the rear extension leading to the gym contains a very large bay of nine, five-light metal
hopper windows that face east. The two-story gymnasium has multiple window bays with four to five, five-light metal hopper windows installed in the second story.

East façade, cafeteria and two-story gymnasium.

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. 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.

South façade of the elementary wing.
An 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.

South façade of the auxiliary building featuring secondary entrance.

Finally, another auxiliary building was constructed immediately to the west of the auxiliary building. The building is connected by a hyphen and also features brick window sills. In 2000, the building was renovated by Tennessee State University to function as a Head Start program.

Northwest façade of renovated wing renovated and rented by TSU.
The TRS complex features many long hallways with offices, classrooms, and various other functional rooms of various sizes. The concrete-block constructed facility is in great shape; however a few areas have suffered from water damage or other structural issues. Many of the classrooms retain chalkboards, sinks, water coolers, and classroom furnishings.

One architectural detail that was once an exterior feature has become interior. The entry door five-light transom and sidelights located on the central buildings main entrance must have been repeated on the secondary entrances. While most of the complex is connected using hyphens, there is a section that was directly added on. The exterior detail is now on the interior.
Two of the most notable aspects of the interior are the good condition of the cafeteria and gymnasium which date to the 1953 construction. The gym is well lit with natural light and features attached locker room facilities that could be renovated. A large stage area is built on the east side of the gym.

(Left) Interior view of cafeteria with full kitchen in rear.
(Right) Interior view of bleachers, basketball court, and stage area of gymnasium.

**Preservation Needs and General Recommendations**

Water is often cited as the primary enemy of concrete construction because it is porous and easily absorbs moisture. Also, once introduced, water can react with minerals and salts within the concrete resulting in staining, cracking and decay. Overtime, exposure to water combined with the effects of freeze-thaw cycles will weaken and degrade concrete. While the Trenton Rosenwald School is generally in good shape, signs of water damage to the concrete walls exist 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 conditioners may also be contributing to the buildup of moisture. Windows are among the most vulnerable features of historic buildings and the most important I establishing the historic character of the building. It is important that the exterior window bays be inspected for improper drainage and leaks.
(Left) South facing wall of original central building shows signs of water damage. 
(Right) South facing wall and floor of elementary wing depicts signs of flood damage.

It was brought to our attention that the entire elementary wing was recently flooded. 
News accounts indicate that in 2010 Trenton experienced severe flooding caused by excessive rain and the breach of several nearby levees. The elementary wing looks to have been completely submerged. The building 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. The elementary wing is significantly lower in elevation than the rest of the school. 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 structure.

Aerial Photography Source: Tennessee Property Viewer, OIR-GIS Services, Tennessee Department of Transportation showing FEMA DFRIM Flood Map http://tnmap.tn.gov/assessment
Further Recommendations and Areas of Research

Although this report provides an overview of the history of Trenton Rosenwald School a much fuller architectural and social history should be completed. Exact dates and scope of the construction projects, as well as, funding sources should be researched. The impact of Federal programs like the National Youth Association and local school boards could also provide valuable insights. A full description of the principals and teachers should be included, as well as, details about student life. Finally, the struggle of desegregation greatly impacted students and faculty. An extensive history of this process would provide many insights into the negotiations between school officials and local residents. Because Trenton Rosenwald Middle School is still in existence, a more complete history could be taught to current students.

The organization of an alumni group, especially focused on those individuals who graduated during TRS’s time as a high school, is strongly recommended. Although school documents and memorabilia from the original school are lost due to fire, TRS continued as a high school until 1968. A Trenton Rosenwald alumni group could be a catalyst for generating interest in the history of TRS and the broader African American community of Trenton and nearby rural areas. The designation of a heritage room could tell the story of the school as well as the community at large, including the countless one and two room school houses—like Mt. Zion—that educated children across Gibson County.

Already many teachers and alumni have contributed oral histories to the work of historians. The transcripts and audio could be compiled as part of a library and interpreted in the heritage room. The richness of the history could be articulated through voice and words even if material objects are few. As part of this process, active alumni and interested individuals could continue to record oral histories as part of an annual gathering or other celebration event.

Beyond celebrating the history of TRS, Mr. Skinner and many other alumni are seeking a renewal of learning and activity at the school. Since the middle school moved across town in 1996, the building has been underutilized. Although some educational classes continue the spirit of the school is gone. Mr. Skinner’s vision for the school involves reinvesting in the facility as an adult education center or satellite community college campus. The future use of the school could make an even bigger impact on the community if the right public and private partnerships are made.
On the state level, Tennessee Governor Haslam’s program *Drive for 55* aims to increase the percentage of Tennesseans with college degrees or certifications to 55% by the year 2025. This goal involves finding facilities like TRS and turning them into two-year, four-year or technical education centers. Also, contacting state politicians about the opportunity to broaden education in Trenton would be a good step. Elected state officials include: Tennessee Senate District 24, Senator John Stevens, Tennessee House District 79, Representative Curtis Halford, and Tennessee Congressional District 08, Representative Stephen Fincher.

Regionally, the West Tennessee Mega Site, recently renamed the Memphis Regional Megasite is a controversial yet promising effort to expand economic development in West Tennessee. The 3,840 acre project is a state funded initiative to develop a site that will attract large-scale manufacturing and high-paying jobs. The need for technical training in Trenton will be greater than ever because residents from across the region will be vying for jobs.

On the local level, *The Gazette* published an article April 16, 2014 announcing that the Gibson County Special School District had entered into negotiations to transfer the TRS complex to Tennessee State University. Although details of TSU’s future plans for the site were not provided, TRS may indeed be transformed into an education center.
Flagg Grove School

Introduction

The Flagg Grove School is a one-room schoolhouse originally located on Elm Tree Road, near the Nutbush Community in Haywood County, Tennessee. The school was built to educate the children of African American sharecroppers living and working nearby. As late as the mid-1950s, the school was surrounded by trees and several sharecropper shacks.\(^\text{17}\) In 1968, due to desegregation, the school closed and was sold at auction. The new owner made use of the school as a barn and corncrib, inadvertently preserving the school until June 2012—when it was donated and moved to the West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center located at 121 Sunny Hill Cove, Brownsville, TN. The Flagg Grove School is the childhood schoolhouse of Tina Turner and is currently being renovated in order to attract tourists.

The Flagg Grove School serving as a barn with shed additions.
Photo credit: Norris, Sharon. *Haywood County, Tennessee.* Black America Series. 2000

**History**

The founding of the Flagg Grove School in the late 1880s is part of a rich tradition of community led efforts to provide education to African American children. There was not a monolithic approach to creating schools—meaning that many individuals and types of organizations provided funds to build schools. Working beyond the influence of the Freedmen’s Bureau, African American leaders in Haywood County, Tennessee took advantage of a period of political power and increasing sense of independence to establish schools. In an interview about Flagg Grove, Historian Dorothy Granberry explains, “Since Blacks had some modicum of power at the time, out there in Flagg Grove, that people had some reason to believe that they could get some support for that school.”

Flagg Grove’s founder, Benjamin Brown Flagg, was born 1856 on a farm in North Carolina. After the Civil War, Flagg migrated with his family to West Tennessee where they acquired large parcels of land. Flagg married Lula Virginia Haynes and became an ordained Baptist preacher. Concerned by the lack of educational opportunities in his community Flagg

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19 Candice Ludlow, “Flagg Grove School.”
sold one acre of land to seven named trustees of the Flagg Grove School House in 1889. The price was twenty-five dollars which was one third the going rate per acre.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{center}
Benjamin Brown Flagg and Lula Virginia Haynes.
Images Provided by WTDHC
\end{center}

In order to operate, the privately funded school required parents to pay $1.00 a month and an additional $0.25 in the winter for wood to heat the school.\textsuperscript{21} Without further research, nothing is known about the actual structure that was built by Flagg; however the school likely adhered to historical descriptions of other one-room rural schools—described as ramshackle, of poor quality and in disrepair. During this time, teachers in African American rural schools faced “overcrowding, irregular attendance, skewed grade distributions, and the general “overagedness” of students.”\textsuperscript{22}

In addition to the general chaos of one-room schooling, the early Flagg Grove teachers may have faced hostility from white citizens threatened by black rural education. Haywood County was one of the state’s two predominantly black counties in a seven-county region that that was home to nearly one half of the black population in Tennessee. In Granberry’s account of the rise of black community leadership at the time of Flagg Grove’s founding indicates that the

\textsuperscript{20} Deed. Courtesy of West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center

\textsuperscript{21} Candice Ludlow, “Flagg Grove School.”

white population feared of a “loss of power and hegemony” which spurred a sharp rise in racially motivated violence aimed at schools. White citizens were concerned by the linkage between education and political rights. Despite the challenges, approximately fifty African American schools of varying sizes were built in Haywood County based on a hand-drawn map on display at the Dunbar Carver Museum in Brownsville.

For over seventy years, Flagg Grove School educated rural children from the 1st through the 8th grade. Students wishing to attend high school traveled to the Haywood County Training School (later called Dunbar-Carver High School) in Brownsville. At some point, the school became publicly funded as part of the Haywood County school system. In the late 1960s, Flagg Grove was closed in response to federally mandated school desegregation.

Hand-drawn map of Haywood County African American schools. From the collection of Dunbar Carver Museum.

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Structural Overview

Although Flagg Grove was established in 1889, the original structure is long gone. The Flagg Grove School in existence today was constructed in the 1920s or early 1930s. This date estimate is based on measurements of the original floorboards (3.5 inches) and the presence of beaded board on the interior walls. This timeframe is also suggested based on the overall design which reflects the philosophy of the Progressive reform movement that aimed to standardize and improve rural schools.

The Flagg Grove School measures 19.5 feet wide and 37.5 feet in length. The simple rectangular shape, gabled roof, banks of evenly spaced windows, and location of the entrance at the end of the building strongly resemble the Community School Plans produced by the Rosenwald Fund after 1921. The new designs improved on many of the most basic features of rural schools including, directional orientation, lighting, air circulation, room for storage, and heating and cooling.²⁴

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When compared to the Rosenwald floor plan I-A, Flagg Grove is much more minimal, but many of the design concepts are detectable. Flagg Grove has less windows than Plan I-A and they are arranged differently, however one side of the school house does feature the bulk of the windows similar to the Rosenwald plan. Instead of cloak rooms near the entrance, Flagg Grove has simple cubbies for storage. Instead of an industrial room behind the teacher’s desk, Flagg Grove has a raised platform to elevate the teacher from the class.
Flagg Grove’s interior details and furnishings also reflect the influence of Rosenwald designs. The upper part of the interior walls are painted a light grey or white while the lower section is painted a dark green. This type of color-blocked paint treatment was explicitly dictated in the Community School Plans inorder to accentuate the effect of the natural light streaming in the windows, while at the same time reducing the glare for seated students.25

Finally, the desks found in the Flagg Grove School illustrate a significant design evolution influenced by the Rosenwald plans. Along with the new modern school, Rosenwald officials mandated the replacement of rough wooden slab desks with mass produced “patent desks” and other modern furnishings. Because buying new desks was not always possible, many communities continued to use the “Tuskegee-style” homemade desks, benches and pews often found in black schools. Flagg Grove’s inventory reflects both styles.

Preservation Needs and General Recommendations

The preservation of Flagg Grove School is a unique story of fortuitous adaptive reuse and community activism. The project to save the Flagg Grove school began when WTDHC Director, Sonia Outlaw-Clark who saw the heritage tourism potential of moving the school to her facility:

Ideally, we would love to preserve Flagg Grove School on its original acre of ground, but since this is not possible, it just makes sense to move it where it can be restored and seen by the most people. The school will become an integral part in telling our story, especially where education and music are concerned in Haywood County.26

In order to achieve the task, Ms. Outlaw-Clark engaged with the owners of the school—Pam and Joe Stephens, the Brownsville community, and Tina Turner herself. In 2012, the City of Brownsville funded the relocation of the school, which first needed to be stripped of its barn encasement and prepared for transport. A non-profit group called Friends of the Delta Heritage Center was created to support the project. Local preservation groups helped clear out the school and provided salvaged materials from other less intact schoolhouses in the area.

Perhaps most significant, Tina Turner sent a longtime assistant to visit Brownsville to talk with locals and learn about the Flagg Grove project. Ms. Rhonda Graam spent a week exploring Haywood County, talking with schoolmates and family of Tina, as well as, learning about Nutbush and the surrounding community. It is likely that the decision to fund an extensive renovation involving the display of Tina Turner memorabilia was made based on Ms. Graam’s visit. The most transformative aspect of the Flagg Grove restoration is preparing the school to be open to the public. The WTDHC website states:

26 West Tennessee Delta Heritage Website.
Regarding the efforts to save the school and open it to the public, Tina Turner commented: "I'm pleased to know that children from around the world, who stop at the Visitor's Center in Brownsville, will be able to visualize what it was like growing up during the era of my childhood."  

The design of the installation involves a central area with tall glass cases displaying objects associated with Tina Turner’s international career, as well as, a section near the stage intended to evoke the “authentic” look and feel of the Flagg Grove School. Ms. Outlaw-Clark requested the help of the Center for Historic Preservation to produce panels on the history of the Flagg Grove School.

Detail of the design plans for the Flagg Grove School Tina Turner installation

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27 West Tennessee Delta Heritage Website.
Further Recommendations and Areas of Research

The task of producing interpretive panels to be included in a professionally designed museum-quality installation that combines the glitz and glam of Tina Turner with the primitive realities of one-room schoolhouses is tricky. The Flagg Grove School has transformed several times since its founding in 1889—from a one-room vernacular structure to a Progressive era schoolhouse to a storage barn.

(Top) Photos of Flagg Grove as a barn   (Bottom) Photo of Flagg Grove after transport.
The final transformation occurred under the direction of the professional designer and contractors who radically altered the defining architectural features and historic materials.

Photos from post renovation site-visit.
Changes include replacing the windows, altering the exit door, reinstallation of interior beadboard in a colorful random pattern, and installation of museum lighting and other modern updates. The decision was made to install four historical panels as a square-shaped column located at the end of the cases. The panels will function as a transition from the Tina Turner section to the historical aspect of the visitor experience.
Panel Themes

1. One-room rural school house facts: lack of electricity, no bathrooms, etc. The panel will begin with a reference to Tina Turner. Like all other rural black students, Flagg Grove was where children went for elementary education and then on to Carver High School – promotion for the Dunbar Carver Museum.

2. Preserving the Building, Saving the Story: This panel will describe the school’s original location and Progressive era architecture. It will also explain how the school was saved by its utilization as a barn and how Tina helped relocate it.

3. School history: This panel will delve into the historical narrative of the school (founders, community contributors etc.). The panel will also include the hand-drawn map of Haywood County schools.

4. Teacher/Student dynamic: This panel will provide interesting details about daily routines of teachers and students. Will consult with local historians and known oral histories.
Conclusion

Each school examined in this report is a historical document of African American rural education in Tennessee. Although the individual school histories are all inherently different, the experiences of the teachers and students and related communities are very much connected. For example—like Mr. Skinner—many of the students who attended Mt. Zion may have gone on to attend Trenton Rosenwald School. Depending on their age and their place in history they may have paid to ride in a private car or perhaps were picked up by a public school bus. Furthermore, the landscape, building architecture, and classroom environment of Mt. Zion was very similar to that of the Flagg Grove School located over fifty miles away. Rural school children experienced many of the same challenges related to simply getting to school including some walking as far as two miles.

One common thread is the monumental impact of desegregation on the schools, including loss of community fabric and identity to closure and abandonment. These preservation projects rose out of a sense of nostalgia that these African American communities have for their schools. Desegregation brought many changes including the ways in which African American communities interacted with schools. These rural schools were a testament of self-reliance and resilience. These one-room schools were institutions that performed many functions on limited resources. Often, financial responsibility would fall to the surrounding community to provide the school with its needs. There was a collective energy invested in achieving a common goal. There was a sense of loss of this educational heritage after desegregation. Schools were no longer community-controlled institutions with African American leadership, culture and traditions. These preservation efforts are motivated by the need to honor the struggles of past generations and to preserve their stories for future ones. These schools are not merely buildings; they are a culmination of values and experiences.²⁸

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1860 United States Federal Census.

1889 Flagg Grove Deed. Courtesy of West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center
Appendix


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[Handwritten document image]

A. T. Hamilton 2nd Reg. April 28th 1855

To E. maior, J. A. Hamilton of the county of Tan, in the State of Kentucky, for and in consideration of the sum of five hundred to me in hand paid, the said Hamilton, on the part of the party of the first part, for the sum of one hundred and fifty dollars to the said James A. Hamilton, on the part of the party of the second part, the following described tract of land, to wit: The land bounded on the north by a line on the south side of land belonging to the said E. Major, on the east by a line on the south side of land belonging to the said J. A. Hamilton, on the south by a line on the north side of land belonging to the said J. A. Hamilton, and on the west by a line on the south side of land belonging to the said J. A. Hamilton.

W. T. Hamilton

J. T. L. Young

[Handwritten signatures]
1889 Flagg Grove Deed. Courtesy of West Tennessee Delta Heritage Center