

Mississippi Landmark Significance Report

Prepared by
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ISAAC CHAPEL ROSENWALD SCHOOL Byhalia vicinity, Marshall County

Owner: Marshall County, Mississippi
(by and through the Board of
Supervisors)

- National Register Status: Not listed.
- Date considered by committee:
February 9, 2017

PROPERTY/LEGAL DESCRIPTION:

RESOURCE DESCRIPTION: This one-story, wood-frame, former school building was built in 1921-1922 with assistance from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which donated \$1000 of the \$3,800 cost of the building.¹ The school closed in 1963. In the summer of 1965, it reopened as a Head Start under the management of the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), but this closed in the spring of 1972. The building has since been used for storage by the county.

The rectangular building stands on a poured concrete foundation on a rise overlooking Highway 309, and is topped by a front-gabled, pressed-seam metal roof. The building is a variant on the standard Rosenwald Plan #3-B, which was designed to face north or south and have three classrooms plus an industrial room.² The original windows were probably 9/9 wood double-hung sash, but these were replaced c.1970 with 1/1 aluminum-frame windows, probably at the same time that original clapboard or drop siding was replaced with the current Masonite panels. This major alteration also filled in much of the space previously occupied by the large window groupings. The original 4-light, 2-panel wood door that is slightly off-center on the E façade remains, sheltered by a deteriorating but original gabled entrance awning on triangular knee braces.

While the exterior has been altered, the interior is highly intact. The main entrance leads into a short hallway running on an east-west axis, from which open all classrooms, the industrial room (remodeled as a kitchen, probably c.1970), and two cloak rooms (later converted to a book room and girls and boys restrooms). The two classrooms on the south side have a cased partition wall between them, originally filled with folding doors that could open for large gatherings and presentations from the stage that fills the west end of the southwest classroom. In a departure from the standard Rosenwald plan, another cased opening is between the southwest and northwest classrooms, so that that stage could potentially be viewed from all three classrooms for large assemblies. This opening is still filled with its original 5-panel folding doors, a rare survivor of this once-common interior detail. Instead of the typical glass transoms, square ventilators line the hall to move air throughout the building. Walls, ceilings, and floors are tongue-and-groove flushboard, with some floors later covered with roll vinyl flooring.

An unusual native stone terrace steps down from the front entrance and may represent a Depression-era improvement to the property.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: This is one of only about a dozen surviving Rosenwald schools in Mississippi. The Julius Rosenwald Fund was begun at the request of Booker T. Washington in 1912 and was the gift of the CEO of Sears, Roebuck Co., Julius Rosenwald. The Rosenwald program was the only philanthropic effort in the early 20th century to concentrate on improving the learning environment of black students in the South.



¹ According to [Rosenwald Fund records](#), the local African American community donated \$2,600 toward construction of the school, while the white community privately donated \$200, and the public school system contributed \$0 toward the construction of this public school.

² Typically, the Rosenwald Fund strictly enforced the orientation of the school building so that buildings always had the large grouped classroom windows facing east or west to catch direct sunlight, but here at Isaac, the school faces directly east rather than the north or south orientation it was designed for; in this orientation, the grouped windows would have faced north and south, which did not meet Rosenwald standards.

Between 1912 and 1932, when it closed, the Fund contributed to over 5,300 school buildings for African Americans in the 15 Southern states, with its largest number coming in the decade of the 1920s. The Rosenwald Fund typically donated about one-third of the cost of a building, expecting the black community to raise another third and the white or public contribution to round out the difference. After 1920, the Rosenwald Fund required their schools to be built to a set of standardized plans that were designed to allow maximum natural light and ventilation through large window grouping that faced east and west. Transoms in the hallways allowed light through to these interior spaces, and air movement through the building. Auditoriums were required spaces for buildings of four classrooms or larger. In a segregated system in which public entities were spending tax money on schools for white children but neglecting black education, the Rosenwald Fund represented the most significant advance in African American education since the beginning of public education.

Mississippi had the second-highest number of Rosenwald schools, behind North Carolina, totaling 557 plus 58 teachers' houses and 18 vocational buildings. Unfortunately, surveys of Rosenwald schools around the South indicate that Mississippi has one of the lowest rates of survival of all the states, making the fifteen schools that do survive significant on the statewide level for their association with this important educational program for African Americans.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE: In the late 1910s and 1920s, the Rosenwald plans introduced groundbreaking standards for rural and small-town school architecture, especially in the South for both races. These seemingly simple designs, using easily available materials and straightforward construction methods that even amateur carpenters could undertake, provided to rural students for the first time good ventilation, high-quality light for reading and writing, standardized classroom sizes, closets, auditoriums and stages.

INTEGRITY: This school building has low integrity on the exterior and high integrity on the interior. Compared to all other rural schools of its era, and especially compared to Rosenwald schools, which hardly survive in the state, it is considered moderately intact and eminently restorable. While it could be argued that the insertion of aluminum windows and the cladding in Masonite represent the Head Start era, in this case, due to the deterioration of the Masonite exterior, we recommend that future exterior renovations focus on returning clapboard or dropped siding as a more weather-resistant material and restoring the large window groupings in each classroom.

DESIGNATION INTENT/PROPERTY DESCRIPTION: This designation covers both the exterior and the interior of Isaac Chapel Rosenwald School and the stone terrace.



Figure 1: Center hallway, view to W from front entrance



Figure 2: SW classroom, with stage to left and folding door partition into NW classroom in background.



Figure 3: Isaac School, photograph 1955 taken as part of a statewide school survey mandated by the Legislature. This picture shows that the school never had the half-width porch that was shown in the standard Rosenwald Plan #3-B.

Source: MDAH Series 1513: School Photograph Scrapbooks, Item 2090.

http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/series/schoolphotographs/detail/161303

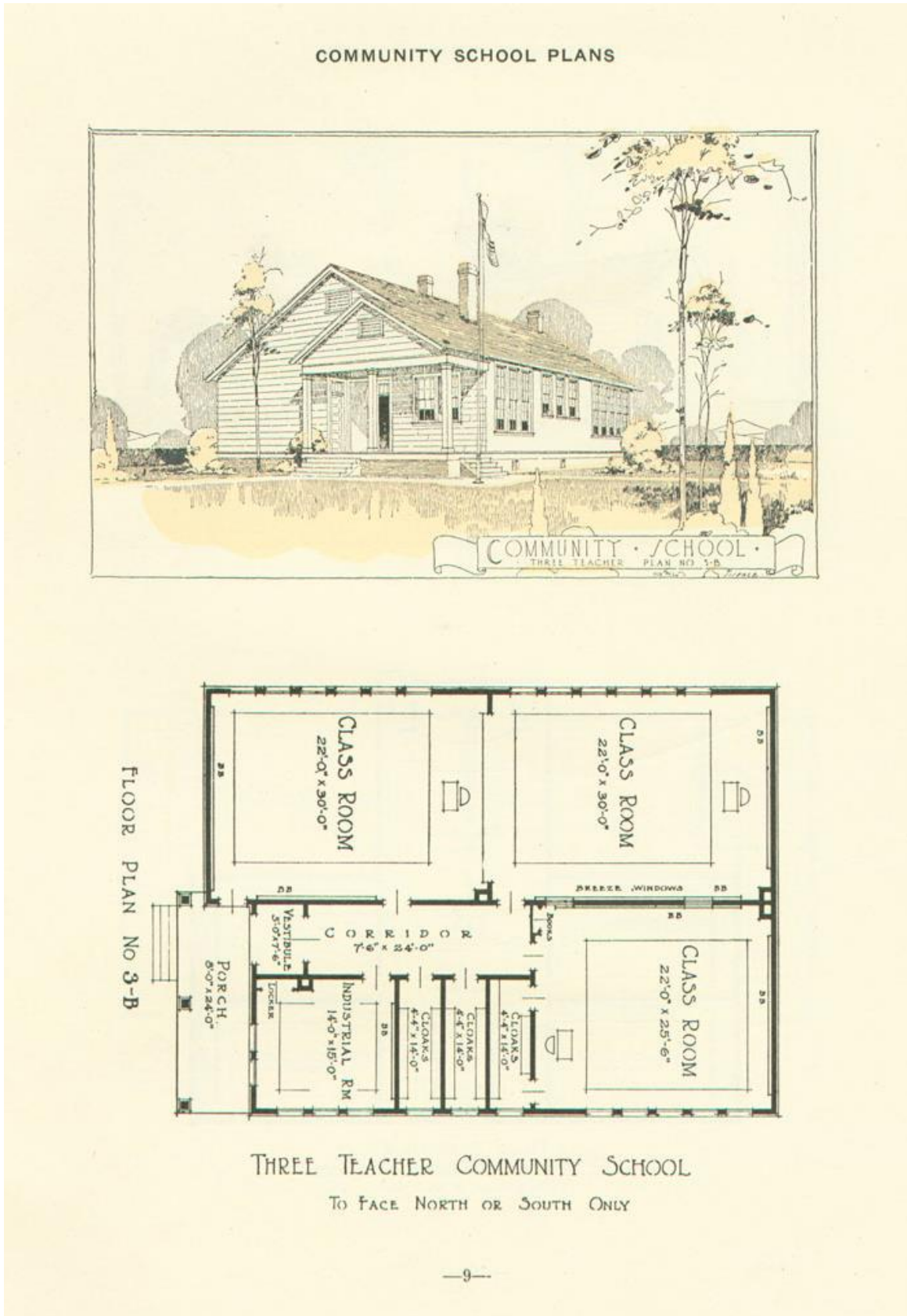


Figure 4: Standard Community School Plan #3-B, published by the Julius Rosenwald Fund