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Siloam School readies for new generation of community learning

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7-8 minutes

Siloam's architectural plan was developed at Tuskegee Institute as part of the Rosenwald Schools program.

Siloam's architectural plan was developed at Tuskegee Institute as part of the Rosenwald Schools program. Courtesy Charlotte Museum of History.

Charlotte's Siloam School, a historic 1920s Rosenwald-era, one-teacher classroom building that once served Black children in then-segregated North Carolina, is poised to take on a new educational mission and journey. With a new gift of \$500,000 from [The Gambrell Foundation](#), the Charlotte Museum of History has raised \$1.2 million to save the historic Siloam School, exceeding its original \$1 million goal.

As part of the project, the museum will move the historic school building to its 8-acre campus in east Charlotte. The restored space will become a community resource and center for history education, including exhibits about the 20th-century Black experience and the region's history of racial discrimination and injustice. The Siloam School will be the only Rosenwald-designed school in Mecklenburg County devoted to such programming.

"Once the Siloam School is moved to the museum's campus and restored, it will become a very visible and tangible part of our mission to save and share Charlotte's history in all its fullness and diversity," Terri L. White, President and CEO of the Charlotte Museum of History, said. "The school tells a powerful story about our nation's history of injustice and discrimination, as well as our collective capacity to come together across differences to build something beautiful in the face of adversity. This project is a testament to what the Charlotte community can do when we stand together to save our history."

Tracing the history of Rosenwald Schools

It was more than 100 years ago on what was then a dense patch of red clay in rural northeast Mecklenburg County, when the tiny schoolhouse was built by and for a small community of Charlotte's African American residents. Research by the [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission](#) indicates Siloam was one of five schools for African American children in the Mallard Creek district in 1922.

Siloam is a Rosenwald-era school, structures so named after Julius Rosenwald, the Jewish retail titan, philanthropist and former chairman and CEO of Sears Roebuck. In an historic alliance with Alabama educator and influential African American leader Booker T. Washington, the men teamed on a decades-long project to build schools and a future for Black children throughout the segregated South.

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Charlotte's Siloam School had 60 Black children registered in 1924, according to the Charlotte Museum of History. The museum

is moving the structure to their campus and will restore the schoolhouse as an interpretive education and community center.

Photo by Joshua Komer. Courtesy Charlotte Museum of History

Rosenwald schools were funded, built and operated through a unique public/private partnership where community-raised funds were matched by [Rosenwald's Foundation](#), with the schools built using plans and prototypes designed at the Booker T. Washington-led Tuskegee Institute. Municipal school districts provided teacher salaries and operating funds to the segregated schools, often at a fraction of what was dedicated to schools for white children.

Nearly 5,000 [Rosenwald Schools](#) were built throughout 15 Southern states between 1917 and 1932. North Carolina led the way with 813 structures built including a small number of teacher homes and workshops. Mecklenburg County was home to 24 Rosenwald Schools, according to Fisk University, which maintains a database about the schools. Only seven remain in the county today.

Rosenwald Schools served nearly 750,000 rural Black children, according to the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#). By 1928, nearly one in five rural Southern schools was a Rosenwald School, with an estimated one third of rural Black schoolchildren in attendance. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled against legally enforced school segregation by race and most Rosenwald Schools were subsequently abandoned or repurposed.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places

Siloam is a local historic landmark and is listed on the [National Register of Historic Places](#). While records suggest that the

Rosenwald Fund did not provide matching funds for the school's construction, the structure followed a unique Rosenwald School building plan — a one-teacher community school with a single classroom and an industrial work area. The school is unique in its design and the only one of its architectural types in Mecklenburg County.

Upon completion of the structure's precarious physical move, the museum will stabilize and restore the structure, upfit it with electricity, HVAC and modern safety systems and create an exhibition on the region's African American history. The museum will also use the schoolhouse as a community gathering space to serve as a catalyst for discussion around racial cooperation and reconciliation.

"Projects like Save Siloam School are important investments for our city to make," Charlotte Mayor, Vi Lyles said. Lyles helped obtain a \$50,000 award from the City of Charlotte for the project. "While we have great opportunities in our city going forward, we must remember and be reminded that everyone didn't have a chance to get equal footing. The idea of addressing social justice and equity through history is a very important one."

Michael J. Solender is a Charlotte, N.C.-based journalist. His work has been featured at The New York Times, Smithsonian Magazine, Metropolis Magazine, Salvation South, Southern Living, Charlotte magazine, NASCAR Illustrated, American City Business Journals, Business North Carolina, The Jewish Daily Forward, and others. Read more from him at <https://michaeljwrites.com/>

