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Book Review: A Better Life for Their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools That Changed America

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Off the SHELF

A Better Life for their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools that Changed America by Andrew Feiler (University of Georgia Press, 2021: ISBN 9780820358413, \$24.60)

No one could have imagined that during the segregation era, Julius Rosenwald—a philanthropist and president of Sears, Roebuck and Co.—and Booker T. Washington—a former slave and founder of the Tuskegee Institute—would collaborate to create a program for African American children in the rural South that would impact their lives for years to come and change America. This program commanded the building of 4,978 schools known as Rosenwald Schools across 15 southern and border states.

In Andrew Feiler's photographic work *A Better Life for their Children*, Feiler travels to all 15 states to create a visual narration of the remaining school structures, with anecdotes from former students, teachers, and preservationists. Feiler wanted to pay homage to the program's earlier days, when Rosenwald School students and teachers would be photographed in front of their new schoolhouses, so he uses black-and-white horizontal images throughout the book. Of the 4,978 schoolhouses, only about 500 remain, and about half of those schools have been restored.

The book begins with a foreword from the late Congressman John Lewis. Lewis, who grew up in Pike County in Alabama, attended a Rosenwald School. He reminisces about the small, wooden

building next to a church that had no running water or a well. The school did have a small library filled with biographies that Lewis loved to read.

Jeanne Cyriaque, African American programs coordinator for the State of Georgia Historic Preservation Division, pens an introduction to and history of the Rosenwald program in the book. Cyriaque learned about Rosenwald Schools from her attendance at a conference in Alabama. With this knowledge, she began searching for Rosenwald Schools in Georgia. She discovered that three Georgia Rosenwald Schools were listed in the National Register of Historic Places: T.J. Elder School in Washington County, Hiram School in Paulding

County, and Noble Hill School in Bartow County. Cyriaque found that the last Rosenwald School was built after the end of the program in 1937 in Warm Springs, GA, by the intervention of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who frequently traveled to Warm Springs for polio treatment. When funding came up short, Roosevelt himself contributed \$1,000 to erect the Eleanor Roosevelt School. Andrew Feiler first heard of Rosenwald Schools from a lunch meeting with Jeanne Cyriaque and after that meeting began his three-and-a-half-year journey to document these historical structures and bring urgency to the cause of their preservation.

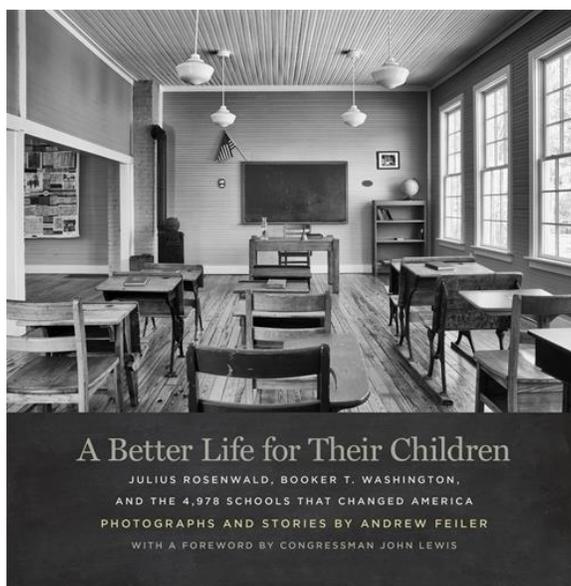


Image courtesy of the publisher

Feiler divided *A Better Life for their Children* into phases: the Tuskegee Phase, 1912–1920; the Nashville Phase, 1920–1927; and the Chicago Phase, 1927–1937. Each phase of this pictorial story illustrates the innovation, expansion, and transition of the Rosenwald Schools program. The impact of the program can be witnessed through individuals who were students of Rosenwald Schools and became contributors to the fabric of America, such as poet and writer Maya Angelou, NAACP Mississippi Field

Secretary Medgar Evers, and—as previously mentioned—Congressman John Lewis.

This book is recommended for academic and public libraries as well as those interested in African American history, photography, and preservation.

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