



Town of Cornelius
Historic Preservation Commission
Historic Landmark Designation to SHPO

Date: August 11, 2006

Cornelius Case #: HLD 02-06

Property Name: Smithville Community Center/Smithville Rosenwald School

Location: South Hill Street
Cornelius, Mecklenburg County, NC

Meck. Co. Tax ID: 005-193-01

Property Owner(s): Milton L. Howard & Karen M. Medley
1025 Jordans Pond Lane
Charlotte, NC 28214

Date of Construction: Early 1920's

Location, Boundaries, and Justification of Proposed Designation

The subject property is located on the east side of South Hill Street approximately one mile southwest of the Town Center of Cornelius. The entire property, comprised of 2.09 acres and a house, is included in the proposed designation. The structure was built in the early 1920's as a schoolhouse under the Rosenwald School Program (Plan #3), a program established in the early 1900's to improve education for African Americans in the south.

Area Description

The property is denoted as part of the **Outlying Resources** section which is located outside the four main survey areas. Structures in the Outlying Area include houses, farms and churches. The Smithville Rosenwald School is one of two former schoolhouses on the survey. Both were constructed in the early 1900's. Each of the former schools has very different styles. The Rosenwald School is a one-story building with a high hip roof. Being one of the earlier Rosenwald schools, it had just three rooms. As was common at the time, the structure is built upon brick piers¹. The other school house (Cornelius Elementary) on School Street is a one-story square building with a basement and a low pyramidal roof. In addition to the physical differences, the Rosenwald School was the local school for African Americans in the area while Cornelius Elementary School was a school for whites only.

Historic Background and Significance Assessment

The Rosenwald School was constructed in the early 1920's and operated as a school until the late 1940's. Ex-slave Booker T. Washington conceived the idea of a "hands-on self-help" approach to education which he called "industrial education"². He used Northern philanthropists to help this effort and headed the Tuskegee Institute, a major black college, before teaming with Julius Rosenwald, CEO of Sears, Roebuck and Company to build rural

schools for the black community. Together, they were one of the first to utilize the matching grant idea a “now common philanthropic tool”³. Rosenwald and the community came up with the cash and the white school board agreed to operate the facility. A Rosenwald Fund official later wrote: “not merely a series of schoolhouses, but a community enterprise in cooperation between citizens and officials, white and colored”. Deanna Kerrigan, external programs manager of the North Carolina Museum of History, states “The schools are important in North Carolina history because they really show how communities, some very small, could come together, raise the money and commit human resources to building high-quality schools. They really paint a picture of how resourceful rural communities were and are”⁴.

Approximately 5,350 such schoolhouses were built across 15 southern states⁵. North Carolina had the majority of the structures with more than 800 schools, 26 in Mecklenburg County alone⁶. The large number of schools in Mecklenburg County is attributable to the County being a large cotton-growing region which remained strongly rural, despite the growth of the City of Charlotte at that time. Ten of these structures in Mecklenburg County remain today⁷.

In the beginning, it was common to have one-, two- or three-room buildings, often with movable partitions to create an assembly hall when needed. The schools were characterized by large windows to allow the sun to light the rooms, as electricity often did not reach rural areas in those times. Design was carefully planned specifying room size and height, blackboard and desk placement, paint colors and use of window shades to maximize the use of natural light. The Rosenwald School Program has been called the “most influential philanthropic force that came to the aid of Negroes at that time”⁸.

The Smithville Rosenwald School

The County Board of Education purchased the land from brothers James H. and Clifford E. Smith for \$500. The Smithville community was named in honor of the continued generosity of the Smith family⁹. It was built in 1922 at a cost of \$4,000. African Americans contributed \$500; the white community contributed \$2,600; and, the Rosenwald Fund contributed \$900¹⁰. The school’s design is based on floor plan No. 3, a three teacher community school which was to face East or West only¹¹. The teachers at that time were Zetta Sherrill and Mrs. Geraldine McCullough. Of the approximately 160 elementary aged African American children in the area, 135 students were enrolled with an average daily attendance of 102¹².

Ms. Verdie Torrence attended first through fifth grades at the Smithville Rosenwald School before going on to Davidson Elementary (what is now the Ada Jenkins Center) when Smithville closed. Ms. Torrence later taught at Huntersville and Cornelius Elementary Schools which she states “were schools I couldn’t go to”.

Ms. Annie Gaston also attended first through fifth grades at the Smithville Rosenwald School, then Davidson Elementary. Ms. Gaston was the Church Secretary for Torrence Chapel AME Zion Church for many years. Ms. Gaston and Ms. Torrence attended school together and remain good friends today.

As described by Ms. Torrence and Ms. Gaston, the school day started with devotion, followed by classes, recess, lunch and classes. As was typical of Rosenwald schools at the time, there was a two-seat privy located behind the school which students lined up to use

during recess. There were two grades per class with the principal as one of the teachers¹³. Most students walked to the Smithville School and later rode the bus when attending Davidson (the bus was operated by "the Knox men"¹⁴). The school operated seasonal split sessions to allow the children to help their families during planting and harvest times. At Thanksgiving, the community came together at the school for one large celebration where everyone brought a dish to share.

According to both women, Smithville was a tight community where everybody knew everybody. They learned, played, prayed, worked and socialized together. In 1954, The Board of Education of Mecklenburg County auctioned the school. Five men purchased the school for approximately \$2,500 and founded The Better Community Club. The five trustees were: Wilson Potts, Ernest Harvell, Ozon Brice, Mack Brice and James Caldwell. After the school closed, fundraising events were often held at the former Rosenwald School for the high school (Torrence-Lytle). Ms. Nannie Potts, wife of Gerald Potts and Cornelius resident since 1960, points out that almost all students who went to the Smithville Rosenwald School were honor students at Torrence Lytle High School.

In addition to fundraising events, The Better Community Club housed a barber shop, held vaccination clinics, and was a stop for the mobile library and a science lab. All three women remember the Saturday night dances that used to be held there. Fun times fondly recalled; times when the neighbors watched the kids walking to and from the dance.

Several Smithville Rosenwald students went on to work for Davidson College, as well as mills in the area. Wilson Potts, a former student, worked for the Blakely barbershop and went on to buy out the owner and opened Potts Barber Shop, which is still open today and operated by his son, Gerald Potts.

Physical Description

The following physical description is taken from the *2004 Cornelius Historic Survey Update*:

The one story Rosenwald School was built in the 1920s. It has a high hip standing seam metal roof with front cross gable. The entry is shielded by a hip roof supported by columns. All original windows have been covered and the entire structure has been covered in vinyl siding. The structure is currently used as a community center, restaurant, and barber shop.

The following physical description was provided by the property owner:

The Smithville Community Center is a one story building with the original roof underneath a new tin roof (green tin). The building has two brick chimneys and the original wooden planks are underneath the vinyl siding. Original hardwood floors throughout the entire building. The rooms in the original section of the school have plaster walls with an outlet for a wood stove which was used when the building was used as the school. The building has the original stage structure now covered with carpet.

Integrity Evaluation

The house has undergone rehabilitation. The original roof has been replaced; however, the original roof has been preserved below the replacement tin roof according to the owner. The owner also reported the original wood planks remain under the vinyl siding. The windows on the northern side of the building have been replaced with like kind one-over-one windows and preserve the original opening size. The original building was expanded to include a barber shop and restaurant, to serve the needs of the local residents. The expansion wing on the south side of the building covered up the large banks of windows that characterized Rosenwald Schools. Both the barber shop and restaurant are now closed and the building is used for community events.

Any rehabilitation proposed to take place following local Historic Landmark designation will require review and approval by the Town of Cornelius Historic Preservation Commission through the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness.

Assessed Value of Property

The Mecklenburg County Tax Assessor's Office assessed the value of the entire property including 2.09 acres of land and all structures and improvements at \$91,700 on February 21, 2003.

Other Information

According to the March 2, 1987 report prepared for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Preservation Foundation by Dr. Dan Morrill:

1. The former Rosenwald School buildings are the earliest black school buildings known to survive in Mecklenburg County.
2. The Rosenwald Schools are a reminder of the Julius Rosenwald Fund's commitment to the improvement of black education and racial cooperation in the South in the early twentieth century;
3. The former Rosenwald School buildings mark black farm communities which once existed in Mecklenburg County, often now vanished;
4. The former Rosenwald School buildings are now local examples of one of America's largest non-residential experiments in standardized architecture in the early twentieth century; and
5. The Rosenwald schools are testimonials to the important contributions made to black education by Dr. George E. Davis³.

Benefits of Designation:

With an historic landmark designation, the property owner will have the benefit of a 50% property tax deferral:

Before Designation	After Designation
Assessed Tax Value of Property: \$91,700 Current Tax Rate*: \$1.1118 Tax Bill: \$1,019.52	Deferred Tax Value of Property (50%): \$45,850 Current Tax Rate*: \$1.1118 Tax Bill \$509.76
Savings: \$509.76 per year	
* Cornelius + Mecklenburg County	

See attached supporting documentation:

- Application for designation.
- Mecklenburg County GIS tax information.
- Charlotte-Mecklenburg tax information provided by applicant.
- Aerial photograph of property.
- Photograph of building after addition but prior to exterior changes.
- Current photographs (6).
- NCSHPO response to staff analysis.
- Floor Plan No. 3.
- Deed from James H. Smith and Clifford E. Smith to the County Board of Education.
- Notice of Sale of School Property.
- Mecklenburg County school budget papers.

Notes:

¹ Charlotte Mecklenburg Historical Preservation Foundation. Thomas W. Hanchett, Overview of Rosenwald Schools in Mecklenburg County, Architecture Description.

www.cmhpf.org/survey&rosenwald.htm.

² Thomas W. Hanchett, *Saving the South's Rosenwald Schools*.

www.rosenwaldplans.org/history.html.

³ Thomas W. Hanchett, *Saving the South's Rosenwald Schools*.

www.rosenwaldplans.org/history.html

⁴ *Carolina Country*, July 2003. "Where were the Rosenwald Schools?" By Patricia Staino

⁵ Thomas W. Hanchett, *Beacons for Black Education in the American South*".

www.rosenwaldplans.org.

⁶ Charlotte Mecklenburg Historical Preservation Foundation. Thomas W. Hanchett, Overview of Rosenwald Schools in Mecklenburg County, Architecture Description.

www.cmhpf.org/survey&rosenwald.htm.

⁷ Charlotte Mecklenburg Historical Preservation Foundation. Thomas W. Hanchett, Overview of Rosenwald Schools in Mecklenburg County, Architecture Description.

www.cmhpf.org/survey&rosenwald.htm.

⁸ The Rosenwald Schools Initiative – [www. Rosenwaldschools.com](http://www.Rosenwaldschools.com)

⁹ Leslie B. Rindoks, *A Town By Any Other Name*.

¹⁰ Fisk University Library, Special Collections Rosenwald cards.

¹¹ S. L. Smith, *Community School Plans*, Rosenwald Bulletin Number 3.

¹² School Budget of Mecklenburg County (colored). Submitted by the County Board of Education, 1922-1923.



00519301 001

BEFORE REHABILITATION















