

Orange Graded School

Prospect Heights Middle School and the school board offices of the Taylor Education Administration Complex (the former middle school) sit on top of a hill in the town of Orange. However, they were not the first school buildings located on the hill called Prospect Heights by the locals. The first school to grace the site was Orange Graded School, built in 1925, as a replacement for the African American schoolhouse on West Main Street.



Photo courtesy of Linda Carlton

Highway marker JJ31 memorializes the heritage of Orange Graded School which was dedicated on Saturday, September 13, 2014. An article published in Fredericksburg's newspaper, *The Free Lance Star*, two days prior to the dedication of the marker, heralded the event:

"The town of Orange will pay tribute to the up-by-your-bootstraps spirit of its Jim Crow-era black residents and a Chicago philanthropist who lent them a hand. On Saturday at 1 p.m., across from Prospect Heights Middle School, dignitaries will unveil a state historical marker to the Orange Graded School, built in 1925 to replace an earlier schoolhouse.

“Only a foundation remains today, fronting Dailey Drive, directly across from the Orange County School Board offices, according to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

“Of the several county schools for black students,” the marker states, ‘Orange Graded was the only one built using the Julius Rosenwald Fund, which was established in 1917 by the president of Sears, Roebuck and Company to construct schools for African Americans across the rural South...’¹

The *Free Lance Star* continued, “In the era of ‘separate but equal’ public facilities for blacks, the Orange Graded School cost \$6,200 to build, according to the Department of Historic Resources. The local African–American community raised 40 percent of that sum.”²

The Orange County School Board sponsored the marker along with a donation from Troy and Kathleen Ayers of nearby Chestnut Hill Bed & Breakfast who paid for construction costs.

Renowned Orange County educator, Gussie Baylor Taylor was recruited to teach at the school in 1925 and later served as the school’s supervisor. The nearby Taylor Administration and Education Complex was named in her honor when it was remodeled from a middle school to an office complex in 2007.

The marker states that Orange Graded School was a Rosenwald Funded school, but what exactly was a Rosenwald school? The National Trust for Historic Preservation explains it as follows:

“Booker T. Washington of the Tuskegee Institute and Julius Rosenwald, philanthropist and president of Sears Roebuck, built state-of-the art schools for African-American children across the South. The effort has been called the most important initiative to advance black education in the early 20th century.

“Attending a Rosenwald School put a student at the vanguard of education for southern African-American children. The architecture of the schools was a tangible statement of the equality of all children, and their programming made them a focal point of community identity and aspirations.

¹Schemmer, Clint. “Saturday’s Salute Set for 1925’s Orange Graded School.” *The Free Lance Star*, September 11, 2014, Accessed April 14, 2021.
https://fredericksburg.com/news/saturday-salute-set-for-1925s-orange-graded-school/article_c22cbabb-27bd-5c64-8281-7fd9c3e7d76f.html

² Ibid.

“Threat: Despite the schools’ historical significance, only a small percentage of Americans are familiar with the structures and their impact on our nation’s history. While some schools are being preserved for community use, lack of resources and neglect still threaten many others.

“History: When a 1954 Supreme Court ruling declared segregation in education unconstitutional, Rosenwald Schools became obsolete. Once the pride of their communities, many were abandoned or demolished. In 2002, the National Trust joined forces with grassroots activists, local officials, and preservationists to help raise awareness of this important but little-known segment of our nation’s history, placing Rosenwald Schools on its 11 Most Endangered Historic Places list. Of the 5,357 schools, shops, and teacher homes constructed between 1917 and 1932, only 10–12 percent are estimated to survive today....”³

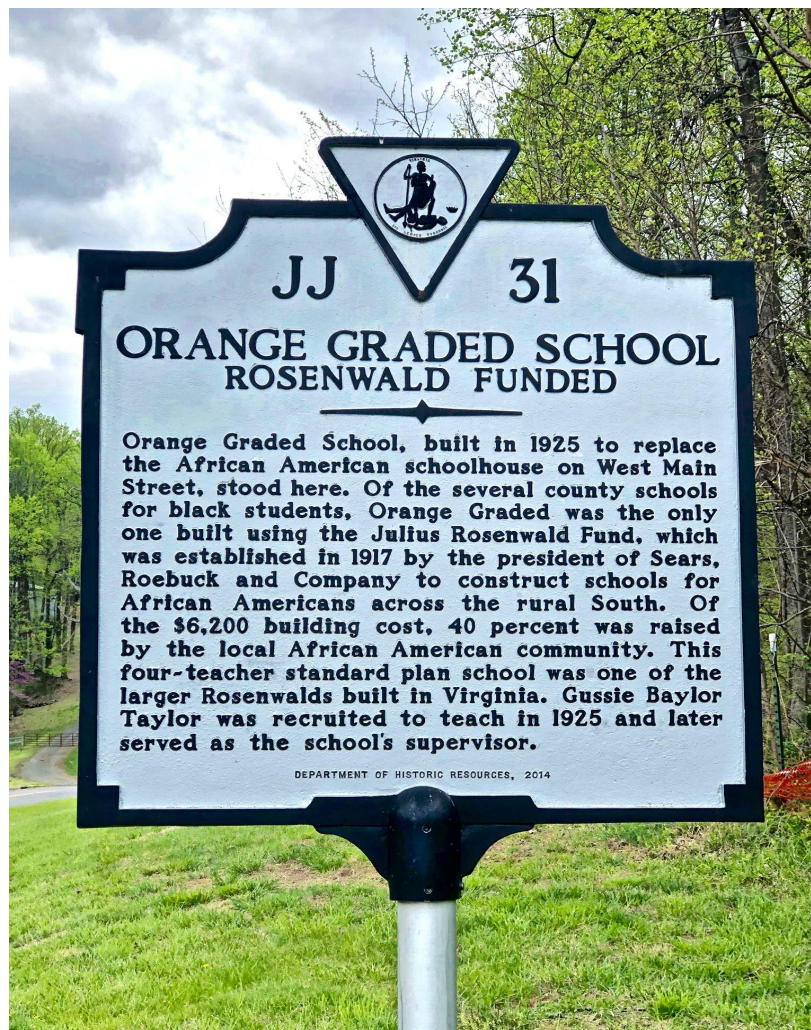
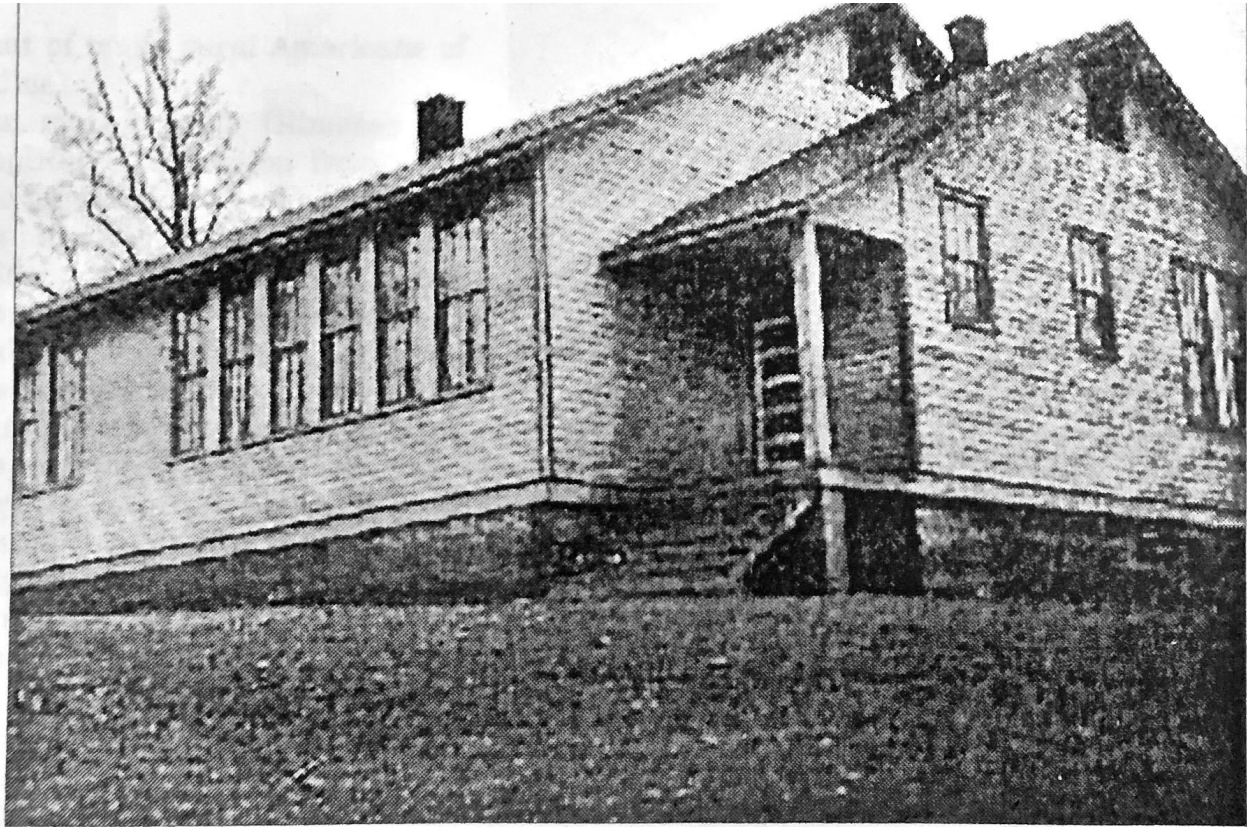


Photo courtesy of Linda Carlton

³ Author unknown. “Rosenwald Schools.” *National Trust for Historic Preservation*, Accessed April 14, 2021, https://savingplaces.org/places/rosenwald-schools?gclid=Cj0KCQjwpdqDBhCSARIsAEUJ0hMTWBbK9KwJK2f1_O8rxOlavOIJHJlIm_cpKSHScSOSFxZOp-mDPjlaApxwEALw_wcB#.YHdooZNXhBw

Orange Graded School, Built in 1925



Photographer Unknown, Photo Courtesy of the *Orange Review*, April 11, 2013

UPDATE:

From the *Orange Review*, April 15, 2021:

"Making their mark(er) Honoring the Orange Graded School

Project's next phase recognizes advocates

By Jeff Poole, editor

"Seven years ago, local advocates and school officials completed the first phase of an effort to honor the legacy of the Orange Graded School and those who supported its construction.

"From 1925 through 1956, Black students in Orange attended the school which sat across from modern-day Prospect Heights Middle School and the Taylor Education and Administration Complex.

"It was one of 350 schools in Virginia funded in part by the Julius Rosenwald Fund, dedicated to constructing safe schools for African-American children. (Rosenwald was part owner of Sears

and Roebuck department stores and partnered with Booker T. Washington, of the Tuskegee Institute, to construct more than 5,000 schools across the rural south.)

“Locally, the premise of a new school was spearheaded by Willie East, who was determined to replace the unsafe and unhealthy conditions of the existing school on West Main Street near Preddy’s Funeral Home.

“In 2014, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources unveiled highway marker JJ31, recognizing the Orange Graded School, which the local African American community helped build.

“The effort to recognize the school and its local benefactors, was spearheaded by Orange resident Jane Ware and assisted by then-school board chair Judy Carter.

“While Ware said she is grateful for the marker--which acknowledges the local African American community contributed 40% of the \$6,200 building cost--she had hoped the marker’s text also could have recognized East’s contribution to the school’s construction.

“Additionally while what remains of the Orange Graded School is shrouded amid trees and brush, supporters of the initial project are hoping to further illuminate this chapter in local history by supplementing the existing roadside marker and cleaning up the former school site for an adaptive re-use.

“The foundation of the Orange Graded School sits to the east of Dailey Drive near the cul-de-sac of Bowler Lane.

“Plans call for the addition of a stone marker with a bronze relief sculpture of the school, as well information honoring East and Carter--both who played an instrumental role in the school, though in different generations.

“At its March 29 [2021] meeting, the Orange School Board approved the placement of the marker at the school site.

“The project is being sponsored by the Orange County African American Historical Society, which is collecting donations in support of the project.

“Local artist and sculptor Thomas Marsh has designed the relief sculpture, and Orange businessman Kent Higginbotham has donated the boulder that will display it and will deliver and position the new marker at the site.

“The Orange-Graded School served Black students from across the county in grades one through seven until it closed in 1956.

“While the historic marker recognizes the school’s existence, as well as teacher and subsequent school supervisor Gussie Baylor Taylor, organizers hope the second phase of the project will paint a more complete and visible picture of the school and its early advocates by creating a place that local residents and visitors can experience.

“In initially proposing the marker in 2012, Ware said she had hoped East’s efforts could be included on the sign. By the time the application was approved through the department of historic resources, his contributions had been edited from the marker’s text.

“East was a local farmer from Jones Mill Road and a deacon at Emanuel Baptist Church, Ware said. He advocated for adequate school facilities and improved educational access for African American children.

“Carter, who served more than two decades as an appointed, and later elected school board member, represented District 3 (which includes the Town of Orange) from 1988-99 and again from 2009 until her death in 2018.

“Ware said the overarching concept of this supplemental project is to complete the original intent of the marker project, as well as enhance the site visibility as an attraction to local citizens and tourists alike....”