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The Seminary School: Alexandria's Rosenwald School

BY ANDREW MCELWAIN

In this 1937 aerial photograph, note the network of paths radiating out from the Seminary School that were made by students as they walked to class each day. A shed and a privy are also visible. As the privy indicates, the building did not have running water, so students would fetch water from a neighbor's well.

Today, if you go to the intersection of King Street, North Quaker Lane and West Braddock Road, you will see the hustle, bustle and traffic that is typical of the region's suburbs. Located close to the geographic center of the City of Alexandria, it is home to Alexandria City High School and its 4,000 students. In the 1920s, however, this was a quiet, rural corner of eastern Fairfax County.

Where ACHS's parking garage now stands was a three-room schoolhouse whose existence laid the foundation for today's high school: Seminary School for Colored Children. It was built by and for the Black communities from the surrounding area including "The Fort" neighborhood located on Braddock Road and "The Seminary" or "Macedonia" neighborhood located along Quaker Lane and King Street.

Education was deeply im-



PHOTO/NATIONAL ARCHIVES

A 1937 aerial photo of the Seminary School.

portant to the people of these neighborhoods, but forced segregation under Jim Crow meant their children were not allowed to attend school with white children, and local white authorities were reluctant, if not hostile, to provide separate facilities. When The Fort and Macedonia/Seminary residents wanted to build a new school for their communities in the mid-1920s, they knew they would not only have to lobby the local government, but would also need outside assistance. They got that help from the Rosenwald Fund.

Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Co., created the Fund to engage in philanthropic efforts and is best remembered today for his role in establishing schools for African Americans. Rosenwald was inspired by the work of Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Institute. Between 1917 and 1932, the Rosenwald

Fund aided in the construction of more than 5,000 schools in rural areas across 15 Southern states, including 364 in Virginia. At the program's peak, one-third of Black students in the rural South attended a Rosenwald School.

However, the Fund did not provide all of the money needed for a new school, just enough to get the project off the ground. Local communities were to operate and sustain these places over time. The Fund offered a set amount of money, and applicants provided an equal or greater amount of money, labor and materials to receive the funds. In the case of the Seminary School, the community raised \$1,000 from Black residents and \$50 from white residents to match the Fund's \$900.

The Seminary School opened in 1927. The school was located on two acres of land donated by Macedonia/Semi-

nary resident Douglass Wood in the heart of the neighborhood. Soon after, the City of Alexandria began annexing parts of eastern Fairfax County, and by 1930 the Seminary School was under the city's jurisdiction. The school was closed in phases starting in 1942 and ending in 1950.

Around 1960, school system leaders, including longtime superintendent T.C. Williams, wanted to build a new, all-white high school on the lot. Despite school segregation being deemed unconstitutional in 1954, Alexandria refused to comply. The school board determined that 25 acres were needed for the project and chose to push out residents of the surrounding neighborhood to acquire it.

The people of Macedonia/Seminary successfully fought to get seven acres back on which to rebuild, but the Seminary School itself was demolished. The city finally began integrating its schools in 1965, including the new T.C. Williams High School.

Historic Alexandria is proud to celebrate Black History Month. Find out more about Black History Month events in Alexandria at alexandriava.gov/BlackHistoryMonth.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.