

**Arkansas Historic Preservation Program
“Walks Through History”
Selma Methodist Church and Selma Rosenwald School
Begin at Selma Methodist Church, 406 State Highway 293
December 10, 2016
By Revis Edmonds**



Intro

Good morning, my name is Holly Hope, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the “Walks through History” tour of the Selma Methodist Church and the Selma Rosenwald School, our last tours of 2016. I’d like to thank the Drew County Historical Society for co-sponsoring the tour, and I especially want to recognize Scott Shephard, Mary Heady, Doris Watson, Bob Ware, and Mae Thomas for their help!

For any architects in the audience, this tour is worth 2 hours of HSW continuing education credit through the American Institute of Architects. See me after the tour if you’re interested.

There are a total of twenty-one Drew County properties on the National Register of Historic Places. During our walking tour, we will focus on two NR-listed buildings.

Brief History of Drew County and Selma

Drew County is located in the southeast region of Arkansas, was formed on November 26, 1846, and named for Thomas Drew, the third governor of Arkansas. As of the 2010 census, the population was 18,509, making it the thirty-ninth most

populous of Arkansas's seventy-five counties. The county seat and largest city is Monticello.

Located on the edge of the Arkansas Timberlands and the Arkansas Delta, its fertile soils produced prosperity for early settlers in the antebellum era. Cotton was the major commodity crop, but corn, apples, peaches and tomatoes were also grown. Following the Civil War, the boundaries of Drew County changed.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, timber harvesting became an important industry. As a variety of industries began to move to the county, several colleges were founded in the county in the early part of the 20th century, one developing as University of Arkansas at Monticello. Today the county has a diverse economy and is an economic center in southeast Arkansas.

Selma was a prosperous hamlet prior to the Civil War. It was located on an Indian trace which originally crossed the Mississippi River at Gaines Landing and headed north through and past Pine Bluff. Soon after Arkansas's secession, a group of men from Selma were mustered into the Confederate Army as Company D of the Third Arkansas Infantry Regiment, the only Arkansas detachment to serve in General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Known as the "Selma Rifles," 83 men would be inducted into the unit at Selma on June 20, 1861.

After the war, violence and intimidation of voters in the November 1868 election prompted Governor Powell Clayton to declare martial law in fourteen counties, including Drew. One of the centers of postwar unrest in the county was Selma. Four prominent Drew County citizens met with Governor Clayton in Little Rock and offered to form a bipartisan "home guard" to keep peace in the county, and the Governor agreed. Members of the militia and the home guard formed a military commission that tried, convicted, and executed one local Klansman for murdering a deputy sheriff and a black man. After Reconstruction ended, Selma was incorporated in 1876, but the railroad soon bypassed the town, and it declined in importance. Selma would later resurface in the public consciousness again when it housed one of eighty Red Cross camps providing refuge from the great 1927 floods along the Mississippi, Arkansas, and White Rivers.

At the town's height, it would boast two stores, a sawmill, a gristmill, and a cotton gin.

In 1876, the first Arkansas chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was established in Monticello. In 1889, the first large-scale sawmill was established by the Gates Lumber Company. The timber was clear-cut with no effort to replenish the growth, and the timber was exhausted by the mid-1920s. The lands were sold to Crossett Lumber Company in 1924. In 1925, Leslie K.

Pomeroy and Eugene P. Connor established the Ozark Badger Lumber Company. Pioneering the method of sustained yield forest management with selective cutting, the company was a model for other logging companies in the 1930s.

Monticello Academy was established for African-American students in 1888 by Charles Mebane, the pastor of the black Presbyterian church in Monticello, Holmes Chapel Presbyterian Church. The school closed in 1933. Hinemon University, a white high school established in Monticello in 1890, was acquired by the Drew County School Board in 1910 and converted into Monticello High School. Drew Central School was established in 1927 and served as a training school for teachers. Two years later, the rural school districts of Drew County were consolidated with the training school. In 1935, the school separated from the college and took the name Drew Central School.

In 1909, the Fourth District State Agricultural School was established to teach the latest in agricultural and domestic science methods to the young men and women in southeastern Arkansas. Through a bidding process, Monticello was selected as the location for the school. By the 1930s, the school had evolved into Arkansas A&M College, now the University of Arkansas at Monticello.

Selma Methodist Church

The Selma Methodist Church is located north of Arkansas Highway 4, and was added to the National Register on September 22, 1972. It was the first building in Drew County to be so listed. The wood frame church was built around 1874 and is a well preserved rural Gothic Revival structure. Its main facade has narrow Gothic windows with pointed arches flanking the center entry, which is topped by a similarly pointed transom. The side walls have five windows each, matching those on the main facade. The apse is located in a half-octagon bay on the north side, whose two windows are also like the others, only shorter. The main entrance is topped by a small octagonal bell chamber mounted on a square base; there is no steeple.

In the winter of 1853 the small Methodist congregation at Selma suffered a severe setback in that church which they had labored to build was destroyed when the roof collapsed in a heavy snowstorm. Selma's Methodists would not worship again in their own building until after the Civil War.

The current Methodist congregation at Selma was first organized in 1870. It could not support a pastor of its own, so it was included in one of the many circuits overseen by the Arkansas Conference of the Methodist Church. In September of 1872 Mr. Joshua Tillar and his wife deeded a lot to the trustees of the

congregation on which to build a church. It was this structure which was destroyed by fire in the winter of 1873.

In the next twelve years the Methodist congregation worshiped with the Baptists and assumed part of the indebtedness of the church building. In 1885 the Baptists deeded their church, where we are touring today, to the Methodists for \$790.43.

The Baptist congregation had organized in 1870, with eleven members and J. F. Griffin as pastor. The little church prospered until the railroad bypassed the town. The church house was built in 1874 by a Mr. Rector, and the architect is believed to have been an itinerant professional from New Orleans who specialized in designing churches. The Old Military Road runs diagonally across the church grounds.

The front doorway, which is the only entrance to the building, is located in the center of the south facade and has double doors, originally taller than at present, with a Gothic style pointed transom. If you'll observe, two windows, one on each side, flank the entrance and have Gothic style pointed heads over a double hung sash. The east and west sides of the building have five windows each that match those flanking the entrance. A half octagon bay window in the center of the north side serves as the apse and contains two windows identical to the others except that they are shorter in height. A small brick flue is located east of the apse just inside the north wall. The roof has approximately a sixteen-twelve pitch and is presently covered with composition shingles. On the south end of the roof is a well-proportioned cupola having a square base rising out of the roof topped by an octagonal bell-tower, minus the steeple, but covered with a low hip roof.

Centered in the south gable, above the entrance, is a circular medallion containing four wooden trefoil ornaments arranged to form a simple cross. The exterior is covered with simple wood clapboard having a plain frieze board, simple corner boards faintly resembling pilasters and a simple moulded box cornice. The structure rests on a low open brick pier foundation. The concrete front steps have three treads and three risers.

The interior contained originally a single flat ceilinged sanctuary. However, the south end was in past years partitioned off into two rooms on either side of a vestibule, above which is a balcony reached by a small staircase from the southeast room. These were removed during the 2009 restoration. A brass bell, housed in the cupola, is rung by a rope which drops to the balcony. A wall ladder provides access to the cupola. Brackets from the original kerosene lamps are still attached to the interior walls.

The design and history of the pews are also interesting. While original, and showing almost a century and a half of wear, you will notice that a partition divides them down the center. In earlier times, men and women sat on separate sides of the sanctuary, in keeping with many early church traditions. The only time that they were allowed to sit together was after they became engaged. The young man would make a public point to move over to sit with his prospective bride as an open symbol of his intentions.

Common throughout are wood floors with simple and plain plaster walls and ceilings. A modern plywood wainscot has been added and the original pews have been remodeled to an extent. On the front of the chancel is a semicircular prayer bench which projects from the rear of the sanctuary in front of the apse. One other feature of this church that I would like to point out is the row of pews to the left of the pulpit. In pre-Civil War days, slaveholders often brought their slaves to church with them, but they were required to sit in a separate section of pews, most often to the left of the pulpit. Obviously, since the date that this church was built came after emancipation, slaves never sat in these pews, and worship was strictly segregated by that time. Yet the pews in that position were still a common feature of church construction until just after World War II. Some churches used them for their choirs, but in many cases, this section would be known as the "Amen Corner." A group of men, sometimes designated deacons, but not always, would normally sit in those pews and answer "Amen!" after certain points made by the minister. While some Methodist churches would have that feature, it was more common in Baptist Churches.

In 2008, after the church suffered extensive storm damage, Methodist Church Resources provided a \$5000 grant to temporarily shore up the building until preservation funds could be secured. The Tillar Charge of the United Methodist Church expressed little interest in providing restoration funding, so the Selma Methodist Church Restoration Society was formed to assume responsibility for the church's restoration and upkeep. In the fall of 2008, the Association took title to the property and a preservation grant was awarded by the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program that was matched by local donations.

The church is still a part of the Tillar Charge of the United Methodist Church. The congregation no longer has a fulltime pastor, but meets every fifth Sunday to sing, worship and celebrate times gone by. It is also used for homecoming events and for weddings. For the past 142 years, the Selma Methodist Church has stood as a lone sentinel of the people's faith and of a rural community's heritage.

Selma Rosenwald School

The Selma Rosenwald School is located south of US Route 278 on the Selma-Collins Road. Built in 1924 with funds provided by philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, it is the only surviving Rosenwald School in Drew County. It is a single story wood frame building with two classrooms. The building was used as a school, serving grades 1 through 10, until 1964. It was then acquired by the local Masonic Lodge and now serves as a community center. The school was added to the National Register on March 2, 2006.

Arkansas was once the recipient of 389 Rosenwald school grants, of which six of the buildings survived into the modern age. Outside of Selma, the others were the Delight Rosenwald School (Pike County), the Malvern Rosenwald School (Hot Spring County), the Oak Grove Rosenwald School (Sevier County), the Mt. Olive Rosenwald School (Bradley County), and the Bigelow Rosenwald School (Perry County). All of these are on the National Register.

Toward the end of the Civil War, 1863 the Freedman's Inquiry Commission suggested the creation of a government agency to deal specifically with the care of the newly freed slaves. In 1865 Congress passed an act creating the Freedmen's Bureau. The Bureau was useful because it committed the United States to the task of caring for the freedmen, and because it made that care a part of the official structure by which the South was to be reconstructed. Even though the Freedmen's Bureau was able to remedy many of the flaws of the relief programs in the aftermath of the war, it was the strongly motivated individuals of the religious groups and benevolent organizations who would become responsible for the education of African-Americans. These individuals were for the most part devout Christians and well-trained teachers from New England, one of whom was Julius Rosenwald.

Rosenwald was quite successful as a businessman, but his philanthropic work always overshadowed his financial success. He entered the clothing business in New York in 1878. In 1895 he invested \$35,000 in the stock of Sears, Roebuck, and Company, and in less than thirty years it grew into \$150,000,000. He became president of the mail-order firm in 1910 and then chairman in 1925. Rosenwald lived in Chicago and was also a philanthropist who had already given money for the construction of YMCA buildings and other worthy projects.

After becoming acquainted with Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute, Rosenwald became interested in helping improve education for African American children in the rural South. During the years Rosenwald was most active as a philanthropist, Sears expanded into the retail chain-store business, and he was

actually absent from the company from 1916 to 1919. As early as 1910, Rosenwald was a trustee of Tuskegee Institute and made gifts on behalf of the rural school movement to the Institute, primarily through close contact with Tuskegee founder Booker T. Washington. Rosenwald was active in a number of Jewish organizations and granted substantial financial support to the National Urban League. Also, during World War I he was appointed a member of the Council on National Defense and served as chairman of its committee on supplies.

He set aside a portion of his fortune to be used through grants as seed money to build rural schools in African American communities in the 15 southern states. This marked the beginning of privately funded matching grant opportunities.

The project began in Georgia with the construction of six such rural schools, and from 1912-1932 over 5,300 school buildings were built in the 15 southern states using total or partial funding from Rosenwald grants. These buildings were built not only to provide educational opportunities for children, but to serve all the people in the communities. Each site was based on the needs of the communities that the schools served, and very detailed plans were used to take advantage of maximum natural heating, cooling, lighting and ventilation, as electrification had not come to most of the rural south. The Selma school was constructed at a cost of \$2,275 with \$500 coming from the local African American community, \$1,075 coming from public school funds, and \$700 from Rosenwald funds.

In 1928 the Rosenwald Fund began to change directions. It began cutting back on rural building programs and trying to emphasize projects concerning higher education and medicine. At the same time it began to encourage the construction of urban industrial high schools that would offer trades education. The stock market crash of 1929 ushered in the beginning of the end of the projects as Rosenwald's funds, invested in the stock and bond market, were heavily depleted in value. In 1932 it was announced that the building program would end. However, the Fund continued to grant scholarships to promising African-American students for eleven more years. The last Rosenwald school was built in 1937 in Warm Springs, Georgia, at the request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The program had come full circle. The first and the last Rosenwald schools were built in Georgia. With school district consolidation in 1964 the Selma school would close.

The Selma Rosenwald School was built facing the west using Floor Plan No. 20 for a two teacher community school. This concept came from *Samuel Smith's Community School Plans*. Smith, the General Field Agent for the Rosenwald Fund, developed a series of floorplans and specifications for a variety of schools

that used the most up-to-date innovations in school design up to that time. Smith felt that having a stock set of blueprints and specifications would allow any community to build a quality school without having to hire an architect.

The interior specifications for the buildings that Smith designed also helped to maximize the use of sunlight. Specifications called for tan shades on the interior, instead of the more traditional green, and preferred that two shades be installed per window, in order to allow more regulation of light. The schools were also designed so that seating arrangements placed the windows on the children's left sides so that their writing arms, at least for right-handed students, would not cast shadows on their papers. Smith's plans were meant to be simple and efficient, omitting corridors wherever it was possible, and Floor Plan No. 20 used in Selma reflects all of Smith's innovations.

Smith also recognized that school buildings often served as community centers, as Selma does to this day. He incorporated that ideal into his designs. He once wrote that "the best modern school is one which is designed to serve the entire community for twelve months in the year...whenever possible a good auditorium, large enough to seat the entire community, should be erected in connection with every community school. If there are not sufficient funds for an auditorium, two adjoining classrooms with movable partitions may be made to serve this purpose." As a result, all of Smith's school designs had an auditorium or movable partitions, as at Selma.

Each school was required to have minimum standards for the site's size and length of school term. Each school must have new blackboards and desks for each classroom, as well as two sanitary privies.

School grants were based on the number of teachers employed by each school. Typical grants were for \$500. Grants of \$200 per added classroom for additions to existing schools were also offered.

As a part of the agreement for funding the schools, local people still had to contribute cash, or in-kind labor, to the construction of the buildings. This was to foster local pride and a feeling of ownership of the schools.

By far the biggest funding source, however, was county tax revenues. County school boards had to agree to provide public support, take over ownership of the new school property and maintain it as part of the public school system.

The school sits on a brick pier foundation and the walls are sheathed in weatherboard. The roof, which is gabled, is covered in asphalt shingles. You will notice that that a single brick chimney, which would have served the two

classrooms and the Domestic Science Room, pierces the roof. Most of the large original windows have been replaced with much smaller, residential-style windows. The main entrance to the building was once located in the center of the front façade, but now is to the left of the façade, having been enclosed. The Front façade of the building is oriented symmetrically around the building's former main entrance.

With respect to the exterior of the frame school buildings, Smith recommended that they be painted white and trimmed in gray or painted gray and trimmed in white. If the community wanted to use a wood preservative stain to extend the life of the wood, he recommended using a nut-brown color and trimming it with white or cream. A photograph of the Selma Rosenwald School Class of 1924 indicates that the building was painted white with dark trim, likely gray, as Smith recommended.

The building plan called for two classrooms separated by a moveable partition. Each classroom would have its own entrance and cloakroom. If you will observe, there is an inset space near the front that was called the Domestic Science Room (also referred to as the “industrial room”) that was used for home economics classes and trade skills programs. The inclusion of this room reflected part of Booker T. Washington's Progressive-era educational philosophy. It allowed girls to be taught sewing and cooking, and boys to be taught farming and working with tools. In the days of the school’s operation, the room was equipped with a wood burning range, a treadle sewing machine, two galvanized washtubs, a scrub board, an ironing board, and some “smoothing” irons. Cooking utensils included an iron pot, an iron skillet, a table, and a water pail. A water source was not available within the school’s immediate proximity, and thus, water was carried from a nearby house to the school on a daily basis. Today the Domestic Science Room is a well-equipped functional kitchen used for community events.

The school’s curriculum would ultimately involve reading, writing, spelling, math, and domestic sciences.

There were two modern (for its day) restrooms, or outhouses, outside the building. There were accounts from former students that the toilet paper came in the form of outdated Sears catalogs, which lends a touch of irony. The foundations for the cafeteria and restrooms are located to the north and northeast of the building, respectively.

Electricity, sidewalks, gas lights, and a flagpole were added in later years, and playground equipment was added to the campus in 1951. A cafeteria and additional classrooms were later built, but no longer stand. Former students have

spoken of a steep hill that was once in front of the school. They called it Bear Hill and played over and around it. Bear Hill was eventually leveled as the road in front of the school was improved.

The partition that once separated the two sides of the building was removed in recent years. As you enter the building you will also observe that the walls, floor, and ceiling were constructed of tongue-and-groove lumber that to this day has resisted the ravages of time and is in excellent condition. Looking to the right, you will notice a large stage area where a large portrait of Julius Rosenwald once hung. Today, the walls are adorned with photos of past students that attended the school and various trophies and awards that were won by a local Masonic Lodge that met here in recent years. The Wyoming Lodge #461, F&AM, and True Light Order of the Eastern Star met here until 2004.

Now this old school building has been restored and put to good use as a community center, was an intended part of its original use. The Arkansas Historic Preservation Program worked with local residents to get the building listed on the National Register of Historic Places. With this designation the local citizens' group became eligible and received several restoration grants to repair and restore this essential piece of our history. On the day of the dedication of the school's restoration, October 23, 2010, the youth group from Sixteenth Section Missionary Baptist Church in Monticello performed a play, "The Old Selma School: Our Little Place in History," to mark the event. The last line in the script summed the community's spirit: "All I'm saying is that is just as important as anyone else's. If we don't care, who will? The Selma Community Center is hard at work, doing its part...I'M HERE!" (Point at self)

Rural schools, especially Rosenwald schools, along with churches, were often the centerpieces of a community, and this was no exception in Selma. Located across the road from the Sweet Hope Church, the Selma Rosenwald School was the center of life in this rural part of Drew County not only while it was a school, but for many years after. As the only Rosenwald building surviving in Drew County, the Selma Rosenwald School is a rare and tangible reminder of the philanthropic legacy of Julius Rosenwald, as well as the ongoing efforts to educate and uplift people and communities that were more often than not, forgotten.

Questions?

Again, on behalf of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, I want to thank you for joining us and extending the hospitality and welcome of your community on this Saturday in East Arkansas. If you are able, please join us for our first

“Walks through History” tour of 2017 Historic Downtown Jonesboro, which is Co-Sponsored by the Downtown Jonesboro Partnership on Saturday, March 11. We will begin at the Frierson House, which was the one-time home of Governor Francis Cherry, at 1112 South Main Street, and will begin at 11 AM. We also encourage you to pick up a copy of our 2017 tour brochure before you leave.

If you are dining out for lunch, we encourage you to patronize your local establishments in the surrounding area.