

Abstract

Under Jim Crow laws in the South, formal learning was difficult for blacks, if not impossible. In particular, the Jim Crow system of disfranchisement denied to blacks physical access to libraries in the early twentieth century. The dual system of schools that resulted from the Jim Crow system meant that “Negro” schools were substandard to schools serving white students and all southern schools were inferior to schools in other parts of the United States.

During the first third of the twentieth century library service was available to less than half of the whites throughout the South and to less than twenty percent of the blacks in the region. Almost three-fourths of the South’s total population lived in rural areas where there was less opportunity to access public educational facilities than the urban areas.

There were progressive efforts to increase literacy in the rural south and some of these movements opened doors of accessibility for blacks. This study focuses on the Rosenwald Southern School Building Program and the Faith Cabin Library Movement in South Carolina, their relationship, and their impact on the nurture of literacy in the state’s rural communities. The founders of these programs, Julius Rosenwald and Willie Lee Buffington, were both white men who supported rural blacks through education at a time when many people endeavored to deny blacks not only access to schools and libraries but also to basic literacy and social and economic mobility afforded most white American citizens.

This study emphasizes the type of community participation that made schooling accessible to rural southern blacks during the early to mid twentieth century as the nation moved towards the end of Jim Crow tradition. Not only did outside philanthropic forces serve to enable a group of disenfranchised Americans to realize a

level of success, but also to remember and document the historic black community's involvement in its own educational uplift. The historical black community's desire for education and the way in which it defined what schools and libraries could do is significant in illuminating our contemporary educational situation in the South.

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