

# Untold Stories

OF BLACK MONTEVALLO



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*Telling the full story isn't just about acknowledging the hard parts. It's also about elevating and illuminating stories of black excellence and achievement that have never received their due.*

-- Brent Leggs

## HOW THE "LITTLE SCHOOL" GOT BUILT

The schoolhouse that once stood at the corner of Island and Bloch is an example of black excellence and achievement that has not received its due in the Montevallo community. This Untold Story continues the story of the "little school" begun in last month's "A Call to Action!"

The building itself, constructed perhaps in the early 1920s, was modest enough. It was a two-roomed clapboard structure like other such schoolhouses, nothing fancy, just a frame structure. But -- and here the story gets interesting -- it was built to bring a public education to black youngsters. A public education. This was huge! In the previous century it was against state law to teach people of color to read and write, and now the county was paying the salaries of its black teachers.

The school was little but it belonged to a revolutionary school-building movement initiated by Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald in partnership with Tuskegee's Booker T. Washington. They saw rural schoolhouses as a means to lift black children and their descendants out of poverty. Schools built across the rural South in the 1920s and 1930s transformed African American lives and helped give rise to the civil rights movement.

The "little school" was not a Rosenwald school but it was conceived in the Rosenwald spirit. The structure was a local community effort -- planned, funded and doubtless erected by members of the black community. True, the teachers, including lead teacher Anna Peoples, were paid by the county. But other expenses fell to the families and their neighbors and fellow church members. We see an example in nearby Wilsonville. A 1929 article in Shelby County Reporter begins: "The colored people of Wilsonville are greatly interested in a plan to build a new three-room Rosenwald school. At an enthusiastic meeting held Sunday afternoon, it was reported that nearly \$300 had been raised and placed in the bank as a building fund. The amount was raised entirely by the colored people themselves" (14 Feb., p. 1).

The late John Lewis, Alabama-born maker of good trouble, recalls his own Rosenwald school in Pike County. "The teachers' salaries were paid by the county, the only government money that came in support of our school.

Everything else . . . our families provided." He pays tribute to the "parents and neighbors who helped to raise money to build our schools and then each year continued to reach deep to purchase school supplies."

Let us now pay tribute to the black folks in Montevallo who brought the "little school" on Island Street into being and sustained its operation. Some of their descendants are still living in our town. A transaction recently uncovered in the Shelby County archives, dated Sept. 8, 1952, reveals that the school property was owned by a Trust established for "the public schools for the Colored people of the Town of Montevallo." Seven trustees are named, and the family names are still well known in the area: John Dubose, Amos Nix, A. H. Frierson, J. E. Peoples, Tom Billingsley, David Nunn, and W.M. Pitts.



Children playing in rural schoolyard, ca. 1915-17.

They were all community leaders -- deacons in their church, officers in the local Masonic lodge -- and their names stand in for a nearly forgotten legacy of black excellence and achievement in Montevallo. We welcome any additional information that you can offer about this Trust and the families known to have been associated with it.

To stay informed about the community effort to honor the "little school," email [Montevallo\\_Legacy@gmail.com](mailto:Montevallo_Legacy@gmail.com). Submitted by Kathy King and Anita Stewart Sims on behalf of the Montevallo Legacy Project.

Sources: Quotes from Brent Leggs and John Lewis are adapted from Andrew Feiler, *A Better Life for their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools That Changed America* (Athens: U GA Press, 2021). The Leggs quote is from the Afterward. Photo is from the digital collection of the AI Dept of Achives & History. The property transaction is recorded in the Recording Office of the Probate Court of Shelby County, Columbiana, vol. 155, p. 561.