

# Preservation project to save historic Georgia school in final stages

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This photo shows a one-room schoolhouse built in the 1920s to teach black children on St. Simons Island, Georgia. Preservationists saved the Harrington School from scheduled demolition in 2010 and since then have spent about \$300,000 to stabilize its deteriorating frame and leaky roof. Photo: Bobby Haven/The Brunswick News via AP

SAVANNAH, Ga. — When she was a young girl in the mid-1950s, Amy Roberts got a ride to school every morning with her neighbors the Johnsons. The couple ran the one-room schoolhouse where black children were taught on St. Simons Island.

"Mrs. Johnson played the piano and she had the younger children," Roberts said, recalling her years attending first and second grade at the Harrington School on the Georgia coast in the years before desegregation. For about 100 years after the Civil War, laws in the South kept black and white students segregated, or separated in different schools. "We used to sing. We had to do a Bible verse that begins with a different letter of the alphabet every day."

The old schoolhouse had been an anchor of the island's black community since the 1920s. St. Simons is a barrier island, a long sandy island parallel to the shore that protects it from the effects of the ocean. Today it's a seaside resort and home to more than 12,700

predominantly white residents. It looks remarkably different than when the Harrington School was new. Roughly three-fourths of the inhabitants were black descendants of enslaved people who worked the island plantations until the Civil War.

### **School Was Abandoned After Integration**

After integration came the school was eventually abandoned, fell prey to rot and was slated to be torn down. Now, Roberts and other preservationists are close to finishing a seven-year project to restore it.

The Friends of the Harrington School, a group that raises funds for the project, recently announced it's been awarded a grant that could bring in the final \$50,000 needed to repair and restore the schoolhouse's interior. The group hopes to have it ready to open in February.

"It's a bridge from the times of slavery through the years up to the civil rights era," said Patty Deveau, the fundraising group's president. "St. Simons Island has a rich plantation history. But not many places talk about the 150 years of freedom."

Historians aren't sure what year the Harrington School opened on the island 70 miles south of Savannah, but it was in the early 1920s. Thousands of schools for black children were being built across the South in a partnership between the Tuskegee Institute under Booker T. Washington and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, the Chief Executive Officer of Sears, Roebuck and Co., a department store.

### **Many Black Children Attended Rosenwald Schools**

By the late 1920s, 1 in 3 black school children in the rural South attended a Rosenwald school, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Many of those school buildings later fell into disrepair, and few are still standing.

There's no certain evidence that Harrington was actually a Rosenwald school, but it was built in the same era and its buildings look much like many Rosenwald schools did.

St. Simons Island was the home of many Gullah-Geechee people, descendants of enslaved people. They retained African traditions and behaviors that survived thanks to their isolation from the mainland. Some worked in sawmills and as carpenters, while others still farmed. Roberts' father was a bartender, while her mother was employed as a housekeeper.

"The reason they built the Harrington School was because they wanted a better life for their children," said Roberts, who heads the St. Simons African-American Heritage Coalition.

## **The School Was Set To Be Demolished**

The school taught about 15 to 40 children at a time, often divided into two groups of younger and older grade levels, until Glynn County schools were desegregated in the 1960s. Then Harrington's students were bused to schools on the mainland. The one-room schoolhouse was converted to a daycare that lasted into the 1970s.

The building of 1,250 square feet almost didn't survive. In 2010, it sat abandoned with gaping holes in its walls and gaps in the metal roof that let rainwater seep inside, while termites thrived in the crawlspace beneath the heart-pine floors. The Glynn County Commission declared the schoolhouse beyond repair and prepared it for demolition.

But Roberts and others determined to save the building banded together. A group of preservation experts visited the schoolhouse and found that the base of it was strong and safe, even though a lot of work needed to be done to restore and save the rest of the building.

## **Repair Work Is Almost Finished**

About \$300,000 has been spent on a new roof, repairing the windows and other exterior work including rebuilding the steps and portico leading to the front door. Inside, electrical wiring still must be installed, the floors need sanding and finishing and walls require repairs and painting.

Preservationists hope to finish the job with a grant from the Watson-Brown Foundation that will match dollar-for-dollar up to \$25,000 in private donations. Deveau said about \$10,000 had already been raised by mid-December and the group hoped to get the rest by the end of the month.

Roberts, who says she "went a little crazy" when county officials planned to tear down her former school, now looks forward to seeing its new beginning.

"Now it is so near the finish the line," Roberts said. "And it's gorgeous."

**Quiz**

1 Read the first two paragraphs of the article.

What purpose do these paragraphs serve in developing the main idea?

- (A) They outline the history of segregation through a specific incident.
- (B) They convey the importance of the Harrington School through a personal memory.
- (C) They narrate a full day in the life of a student during segregation.
- (D) They describe the couple who ran the Harrington School at its best.

2 Read the sentence from the third paragraph of the article.

*The old schoolhouse had been an anchor of the island's black community since the 1920s.*

The author uses the word "anchor" to mean:

- (A) experienced journalist
- (B) essential part
- (C) downward drag
- (D) defending safeguard

3 Read the sentences from the section "School Was Abandoned After Integration."

*Thousands of schools for black children were being built across the South in a partnership between the Tuskegee Institute under Booker T. Washington and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, the Chief Executive Officer of Sears, Roebuck and Co., a department store.*

Adding which of the following sentences to the paragraph would give context for the meaning of "philanthropist"?

- (A) Rosenwald and Washington met often to discuss the project.
- (B) Rosenwald and Washington both agreed this was a good project.
- (C) Rosenwald's job made him wealthy so he could give a lot of money to charities.
- (D) Rosenwald's hard work had helped him get a good job at the department store.

- 4 Why does the author include information about what has been done to repair the house in the final section of the article?
- (A) to show that people are willing to spend large amounts of time and money to restore the school
  - (B) to suggest that people are crazy for trying to repair a school that has become so damaged
  - (C) to list in detail the kinds of projects that still need to be done for anyone who wants to help
  - (D) to advertise the beauty of the restored school in order to attract potential new students