

Williams-King, Alethea: The Widow's Mite ^[1]

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Alethea Williams-King: the widow's mite

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 4/9/2006. Copyrighted.
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When Alethea Williams-King moved to Blounts Creek, she was impressed how deeply her neighbors cared for an old plank building that used to be the community school. It was the [Ware Creek Rosenwald School](#) ^[3], one of more than 800 "Rosenwald schools" built in North Carolina early in the 20th century. Most have been torn down. Here and there, though, you can still find them, silent witnesses to a remarkable heritage of African-American education.

As president of the Ware Creek Community Development Program, Williams-King led the effort to preserve the school building. A New York City native with local roots -- Blounts Creek was her father's birthplace -- she now dreams of the school becoming a living-history site. Currently, she is interviewing the alumni about their school days there.

The other day I visited the old farming community, three hours east of Raleigh, and asked her how the school was built.



Alethea Williams-King. Photo by Chris Seward, 2006. To request permission to reuse this photo, please contact the News & Observer.

My grandfather's name was William David Williams Sr. He was a farmer, a carpenter, a house builder and an ordained minister. He didn't have an extensive formal education, probably less than six years. But he had a set of encyclopedias, and the school was constructed somewhere around 1921. It is a three-room, wooden building. It was known as a "three teacher school." One teacher taught three or four grades at a time.

This school was one of six "Rosenwald schools" built in Beaufort County. Julius Rosenwald was the president of Sears Company. Urged by Booker T. Washington, he gave in excess of \$4 million to build nearly 5,000 schools for African-American. The African-American community that wanted to build a Rosenwald school had to take the initiative. The Rosenwald Fund required that each community commit so much to building the school. In other words, the Rosenwald Fund just provided the money. When I went to Fisk University, I was able to copy the actual records of the Rosenwald Fund. According to the records, the community came up with \$800. The county came up with \$2,000, and the Rosenwald Fund came up with \$1,000, so it may sound like a pittance, but the African-American communities, they literally gave the widow's mite. They didn't have but so much cash. People only had cash one time a year, when they sold the harvest. Rosenwald gave out of his wealth. These schools were really a marvel of "make-do." They were in every sense deprived of the material resources that they should have gotten, but the teachers improvised. It's a marvel how they did it and did it well.

And they did it in an environment that cherished students, that made them feel that they were not anonymous, and that respected the community values: respect for adults, respect for each other, respect for hard work, honesty, thrift, cooperation. There wasn't any separation between school and church then. The very first thing after that schoolteacher rang that bell, they had devotion. "We sang a hymn," they'll tell me. "We might have recited a Bible verse." That's how they got things done. The school and the community and the religious values of the community were one, and they were not separated. That was just a part of life.

Then you might go home -- your teacher might live with you. A lot of them lived with people in the community. They'll say, oh, yeah, Ms. Moore, she used to live with us.

The teachers were very strict. As the kids say today, they didn't play. Nobody would have even thought of saying anything disrespectful to a teacher.

These teachers understood that they had to prepare these children for a world that would not treat them the way they did, a hostile world that they had to grow up in, because that was the nature of segregation during that time.

And I know, having talked to the older ones, that they came out with a better command of the three R's than kids do today -- and the fourth and fifth R's, which are respect and responsibility. They were ready for adulthood.

But these students also felt loved. They were never lost, never alienated like they were after integration.

These teachers might have rapped them a couple times on the hand, but the students knew that they had their best interest in mind. They cared about the students -- cared enough to tell their parents and cause them to get a second whipping.

These students also just had so much fun. I hear 90-year-olds remember recess times 80 years ago. In the back of the school, there was a big lot and they played basketball, dodge ball, den dog. It was also just a joy for them to be in school.

My vision is to bring to life the words of these folks. So that when people come to the school 20 years from now, when maybe none of these folks are living, they can see the faces and hear the voices of the people who actually went to the school.

These folks lived such faith-filled lives, and they depended on God and each other, because that's all they had. And that cohesiveness, that spirit of connectedness, that literally was the community: not just the land.

Maybe that is why everybody is so thrilled that I am doing this. In a way, they feel like maybe the project will help the memory of what the community was remain alive.

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[Personal and oral histories](#) ^[6]

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