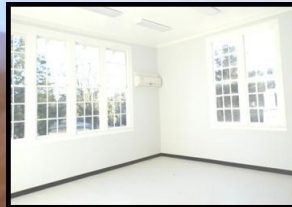


The Rosenwald Building at Prentiss Institute

Prentiss, Mississippi 39474

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About the Rosenwald

The Rosenwald School Building at Prentiss Institute, built in 1926, is recognized as a historic landmark by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is one of only 15 Rosenwald Schools still standing in Mississippi today out of the original 537 that were built through the Julius Rosenwald Rural School Building Program. The Building Program was started in 1912 at Tuskegee Institute by Booker T. Washington with a donation by Julius Rosenwald, the President of Sears, Roebuck and Company. At the conclusion of the Rosenwald School Building Program in 1932, it had produced 4,977 new schools, 217 teacher's homes, and 163 shop buildings, constructed at a total cost of \$28,408,520 which ultimately served 663,615 African American students in 883 counties of 15 states.

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The Rosenwald Building
at Prentiss Institute
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THE ROSENWALD BUILDING
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Prentiss Institute, one of the oldest educational institutions for Blacks in the State of Mississippi, was established in Jefferson Davis County in 1907. The founders, Jonas Edward "J.E." Johnson (1873-1953) and his wife, Bertha LaBranche Johnson (1882-1971), both natives of Pike County, Mississippi, borrowed funds to purchase the 40-acre site upon which this institution originated. The initial location was on the property's entrance road which led east from the Mississippi River town of Natchez into Alabama. Constructed as an early homestead, and perhaps serving as a tavern and an inn for travelers, the property still included a log cabin and the remnants of slave quarters at the time of purchase.

The log cabin, now a museum known as the "1907 Building," served as a dual facility by providing living quarters for the Johnson family and classrooms for the school. The initial challenge for the founders was to convince parents in this rural area to send their children to the school. This feat; however, was accomplished and the school opened with 40 students- five of whom were boarders. This embraced the Johnson's philosophy established at the school's founding- *to provide education, care, lodging, and Christian guidance to children of all ages*. Students paid for their education, room, and board with such homegrown commodities as eggs, chickens, vegetables, molasses, and other farm related goods.

At its inception, Prentiss Institute offered only elementary classes; however, as time progressed, course offerings were expanded. Licensed by the State of Mississippi as a private high school in 1909 and as a private junior college in 1931, Prentiss Normal and Industrial Institute, the high school and junior college, had a peak enrollment of more than 700 students who were taught by a faculty of 44. The campus also grew from those original 40 acres to 500 acres which included farm land, pasture, and forest. Additionally, the physical plant grew from one building to 24.

Emulating the philosophy of Booker T. Washington and his survival model of "black self determination," the school attracted some of the best and brightest African American students, educators, and lecturers. In 1926, 19 years after the school was founded, the Rosenwald Classroom Building was erected on the campus. The educational mission of Prentiss Institute throughout its history was grounded in such vocational training as farming, brick masonry, shoe repair, and carpentry. The program was augmented with courses in basic mathematics, business, the sciences, and humanities. Emphasis was placed on developing and improving the fundamental educational skills of Black students in order to prepare them for vocational careers and for transfer to four year colleges.

Professor J.E. Johnson, an Alcorn A&M College graduate, served as President of Prentiss Institute from 1907 until his death in 1953. Professor Johnson devoted the 46-year tenure as President of Prentiss Institute to addressing and assessing the educational needs of African American children during an era when racial segregation and racism would have denied and deprived many Black students of any educational opportunities.

Upon the death of President Johnson, his wife assumed the presidency. Bertha LaBranche Johnson, a graduate of Tuskegee Institute, continued the educational tradition that she and her husband had perpetuated for almost 50 years. She also incorporated many innovative changes in the school's operations due to challenges that resulted from civil rights events in the 1950s. Significant among those challenges was the decline in student enrollment resulting from the establishment of Carver High

School, a public school which opened in 1954 at Bassfield, Jefferson Davis County, Mississippi. Additional adjustments became necessary in 1959 with the opening of a public high school in Prentiss. These occurrences significantly impacted the enrollment as well as the financial stability of Prentiss Institute.

Prior to the 1950's there were no public high schools in Jefferson Davis County. In an effort to be in compliance with the "Separate but equal doctrine," governmental units of Jefferson Davis County provided some financial support to Prentiss Institute to educate the county's Black student population. The School acquired additional operational funds by sending student singing groups on tours throughout the United States, and by soliciting funds from alumni, businesses, and friends. With the new public schools in Bassfield and Prentiss, substantial student enrollment and financial resources were lost. Recouping these financial losses was the duty and focus of Mr. William "Bill" Crosby, a graduate of Prentiss Institute. Mr. Crosby, the fundraising administrator, devoted all of his adult life to the solicitation of funds to operate Prentiss Institute.

The provision of the elementary and secondary education programs at Prentiss Institute ended in 1959. Recognizing the phenomenal educational contributions of Professor Johnson to Jefferson Davis County, the newly erected school was named "J.E. Johnson High School" in his honor. Notably, the land upon which the school was built was purchased from Prentiss Institute and situated less than a mile from the resulting junior college.

In 1955, under Mrs. Johnson's administration, Prentiss Institute formed a partnership with Heifer International. The two independent organizations were both committed to education and social justice. The relationship formed between these two entities is believed to have been initiated by Mr. Onette Johnson Sr. who was also a son of the Johnsons and a Chicago based lawyer. He established a connection between Prentiss Institute and Heifer International that spanned more than 30 years. An article in the *State Times Newspaper* reported that, Prentiss Institute..... received 15 purebred heifers to distribute to families desiring to diversify their farm income but were financially unable to do so. Later, in addition to cows, projects that included chickens and pigs were instituted. The Prentiss Institute Heifer Project was one of Heifer International's first full-fledged projects in the United States. Mrs. Rosie Hooker, a Prentiss Institute secretary and alumna, issued the first contracts for families to receive cows.

Prentiss Institute experienced relative success as a junior college during the 1960's and 1970's. Offering both academic and vocational programs, recruitment efforts attracted many students. Thus, the financial base of the College was fairly sound. This stability due to the receipt of cash tuition instead of payments in farm products; an abundance of poultry, dairy products, and beef generated through the Heifer Project- which made it less expensive to feed resident students; the introduction of federal student aid; and private donations from alumni and friends.

The College's successes were also evident in the fact that significant construction occurred. It included the *Ruby Stutts Lyles Library* in 1968 and *Ransom Olds Hall* in 1969. In 1971, with the death of President Bertha L. Johnson, Mr. Alcee LaBranche (A.L.) Johnson assumed the presidency of Prentiss Institute Junior College. He lived almost his entire life on the campus of Prentiss Institute, and devoted the

majority of his professional career as an educator and administrator in service to the educational institution founded by his parents.

During his tenure as President, Mr. A.L. Johnson experienced many successes as well as adversities. Most significant among his achievements was the continuation of building construction and other improvements in the physical plant of the institution. In 1972, the *William "Bill" Crosby Cafeteria* was completed. In 1974, a National Science Foundation Grant provided for a Science Laboratory, a lecture hall, and a Media Center. It was also in the 1970's that Prentiss Institute entered into cooperative education programs to enhance the skills of vocational students, and built the Physical Education Complex. During this era, the college also received a grant from the State of Mississippi to conduct a child development program.

Mr. Johnson is also credited with incorporating extensive and progressive academic and vocational programs into the curriculum. Perhaps the one thing that was most important to him was the fact that he was able to continue the groundwork and tradition of excellence in education established by his parents. After his retirement, the effects of both political and economic forces created a downward cycle that was seemingly irreversible for his successors.

In the 1980's the Prentiss Institute Junior College experienced declining student enrollment and financial support. Some of the contributing factors were inherent in the *Brown v. Board of Education Ruling (1954)* which determined that segregation in schools was unconstitutional. Over time, this Supreme Court ruling fostered new attitudes that saw the advantage of allowing Black students to matriculate with White students. Given this changing public opinion, white colleges and universities began recruiting and competing for Black students. Also federally sponsored educational subsidies and student loans made four-year colleges as affordable as junior colleges.

In retrospect, the choice to remain a private institution forfeited the possible continuity that would have secured the longevity of Prentiss Institute had it become state-supported like Utica Junior College chose to do. Given these factors, the alumni-base was simply not adequate to support the financial needs of the college.

Prentiss Institute struggled for several years before closing its doors in 1989. Following the presidency of Mr. A.L. Johnson, there were two other presidents- Dr. Sidney James and Attorney Onette "Sonny" Johnson, Jr. (grandson of the institution's founders), respectively. Although Prentiss Institute ceased to function as an education institution after 1989, the strong tradition of excellence in education, competitive instincts, and school pride lives on.

Graduates of Prentiss Institute are scattered across the country; thus, the Blue-and-Gray spirit still prevails. Every two years, a homecoming reunion brings former students together to reflect on "days gone by". The name Prentiss Normal and Industrial Institute" remains prominent in the community and its legacy continues.

Currently a Board of Trustees which consists of alumni and supporters preserves, maintains, improves, and protects all properties of the Institution. The Board has made considerable strides in these areas through such rentals as its affiliation with the Five-County Head Start Center.

Over the past six years, emphasis has been placed on the *Rosenwald Classroom Building Renovation Project*. The February 24, Dedication Program culminates the opening of the building's first floor. With this comes the Board's second charge which is to facilitate its occupancy. The Board must identify educational, cultural, civic, religious, and other wholesome social activities that will promote an atmosphere that is consistent with the historical values and conducive to the academic climate established by the founders of Prentiss Institute. Additionally, events similar to this *Dedication Program and Open House* are being planned as continuous "activities" as other campus building projects are undertaken and completed.

*Footnote: This information was researched by Patricia McGill-Tillman for the Rosenwald School Dedication Program on February 24, 2013.