

# Julius Rosenwald National Historical Park HR 3250

By Jerry Klinger



January 13, 2021 was an extraordinary day in the history of the United States. President Trump was impeached by the House of Representatives for the second time. The House acted with blazing swiftness, something they almost never do. It had only been one week from when a huge mob of demonstrators attacked, penetrated, and threatened the Capitol.

As Congress voted to impeach President Trump for inciting insurrection, President Trump continued his presidential duties. He signed last-minute legislation that would positively impact the fight against antisemitism, for women's and human rights, education, the environment, and more.

One of the bills the President signed was HR 3250. It is known as the Julius Rosenwald and the Rosenwald Schools Act of 2020.

HR 3250 “requires the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a special resource study of the sites associated with the life and legacy of the noted American philanthropist and business executive Julius Rosenwald, with a special focus on the Rosenwald Schools...”

The measure was sponsored by Congressman Danny Davis and Senator Dick Durban, who are both Illinois Democrats. Important support for the legislation came from the late Congressman John Lewis. HR 3250 passed the Senate on December 23. It was sent to the President for his signature. The legislation is an enabling part of the campaign to establish the Julius Rosenwald and Rosenwald Schools National Historical Park in Chicago.

The Campaign, led by Dorothy Canter, swung into high gear in 2019.

Julius Rosenwald, the president and founder of retailing giant Sears and Roebuck, working closely with Booker T. Washington, the Black educator and President of Tuskegee University, created the Rosenwald fund. Together they worked to help solve the racially motivated virtual denial of educational opportunity for Black school children in the 15 states of the South. Rosenwald dedicated his huge financial resources to the construction of over 5,300 schools for Black children. The schools opened for them the gifts and possibilities of the American experience.

Rosenwald’s efforts on behalf of Black American education was extraordinary. Nothing like it had ever been done before. What made the effort so exceptionally successful was the partnership and purpose of Rosenwald and Washington, a White Man and a

Black Man. Together they demonstrated what the commonality of good could do.

Rosenwald's motives came from deep within his Jewish roots and Jewish fears. He recognized historic antisemitism could easily threaten Jewish life, even in America. As a Jew, as a good American, he had a responsibility to his fellow Americans, Black Americans.

In 1912, Rosenwald wrote, "This matter of civic duty looms larger than any one point of American Jewish life. It is the small cloud upon the horizon which portends danger for the future... But I take it, if the Jew fails in the discharge of his civic duty, he does not demonstrate to the nation that it acted wisely when it gave the Jew shelter and liberty and freedom.

"The Jew must be a pillar of civic well-being and moral capacity. He must be the one who in every crisis will be right, militant for the right, the ethical, the spiritual, the best in national life. If he falls short of this standard, he will himself have brought into being the monster which will one day destroy him and unseat him from his position of safety in America..."

"If distrust grows, nothing can save us. We can only save ourselves by creating a healthy atmosphere – both within our own group and on the outside – of trust and confidence in our integrity and our motives. It may not be an easy path to go; but it will be a path of safety and the assurance of safety to ourselves and to those who come after."

Rosenwald knew the denial of freedom, education, speech, and opportunity to the discriminated non-Jew would come back to the Jew someday.

The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation (JASHP), which I founded and run, has long focused on recognizing the commonality of the American experience. The Jews are part of that story from the very beginning.

Years back, I was taking a tour through a home at a major historical site when I spotted a menorah on the Mantel. I asked the docent about it. Perhaps the docent did not think I looked Jewish. He answered plainly.

“Yes, the home had belonged to an influential Jew who helped found the town. But you know those Jews, they wait until we Christians have cleared the frontier and then stole everything for themselves. They never do the hard work, they just take.”

It has been a directed objective of JASHP to visibly affirm through historical interpretive markers the Jewish role in America. JASHP has completed historical markers in 40 U.S. States and in five countries. Every one of the projects has the word Jew or Jewish in it to acknowledge Jewish commonality and legitimacy as Americans. Very few historical interpretive markers do that. No Jewish organization does what JASHP does.

Late 2017, JASHP began looking into the story of the Rosenwald Schools. There are dozens of markers across the South marking the sites of Rosenwald Schools. Almost none, literally almost none, mention that Rosenwald was a Jew. He was a philanthropist. He was the President of Sears, the Rosenwald Fund, etc., if Rosenwald is mentioned at all.

I do not think the failure to identify Rosenwald’s Jewish heritage is generally motivated by antisemitic intention. Today, I think not identifying Rosenwald’s Jewish ethnicity is more a function of disregard and a lack of sensitivity.

Guy Trammel, a Black Civil Rights activist and historian whom I had met, explained it. “Because of U.S. national prejudice, JR could not let the public know the Sears president was Jewish.”

Early in 2018, I contacted Tuskegee University and asked if they had a historical interpretive roadside marker at the University for Rosenwald. They did not. I offered to fund one for them.

I flew down and met with the senior staff of the university. They kindly took me on a tour of the large, beautiful, historically Black University. Bottom line, I was received well and courteously. By luck, I was taken to the university archives to speak with the head archivist, Dr. Dana Chandler.

I shared with Dana what I proposed. He shared his dreams with me.

Serendipity, or *bashert* as we of the Tribe would say, became clear. I wanted to place a historical marker for Julius Rosenwald on the Campus of Tuskegee University.

Dana shared his dream that up till then, no one was willing to fund, a 13-marker, historical Civil Rights Trail system for Tuskegee. The Rosenwald marker would be a key part of the Trail.

A *shiddach* was agreed to.

What Dana wanted for Tuskegee and what I wanted united in a commonality of good. JASHP funded the entire Civil Rights System. It was dedicated September 2019. A Jew and a highly respected educator at Tuskegee University came together to do good

March 2019, Dorothy Canter asked me if I was willing to fund a historical marker outside the Springfield, Illinois childhood home of Julius Rosenwald. I saw an opportunity and responded positively. It would be a privilege.

Events were moving rapidly in Washington with the proposed Rosenwald Historical Park enabling study legislation, a crucial step in the process of creating a national park.

Key sites were identified for the study and included in the proposed legislation. One of the sites was Rosenwald's childhood home.

The campaign raised funds independently from JASHP, then fabricated and placed a National Park Service style table interpretive marker at the Springfield location.

They also raised funds for the study that became the central part of U.S. House Bill 3250.

Amid COVID, the political campaign, incredible distracting headwinds, H.R. 3250 passed the House, April 2020.

December 23, 2020, the Bill advancing the Campaign for the Rosenwald National Park passed the Senate and was sent to the President.

Amid incredible political turmoil, H.R. 3250 languished. Without President Trump's signature by January 13, H.R. 3250 would fall victim to a pocket veto. Without question, his attention was everywhere but the small enabling next step needed by the Campaign for the Rosenwald Park.

Dorothy and I wrote back and forth. There was no way of knowing if the President would take the time to focus on the campaign's legislation. There were much bigger things that needed the President's attention.

Late January 13, in the evening, Dorothy sent out a broadcast email. The same day that the House of Representatives impeached President Trump again, he had signed H.R. 3250 into law.

If he had not signed the bill, maybe the next Congress would have taken up the effort. That was not certain. It was hoped for but not certain. The only thing we knew for sure was now.

Not to sign The Julius Rosenwald and the Julius Rosenwald Schools Act of 2020 would be an incredible missed opportunity for all Americans to recognize the commonality of good.

President Trump did the right thing for all Americans. In the morning news, the tidal waves of impeachment, censorship, political turmoil, transition, hysteria filled the air. Not a single story was carried about President Trump's signing of H.R. 3250.

Politics is a damning blood sport for all the participants. In this case, a simpler statement is appropriate.

Thank you, President Trump.