



Courageous Citizenship as Institutional Design: Renewing the American Pledge through Civic Pathways

Robert M. Ceresa*
Huston-Tillotson University

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The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America’s civic culture.”

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Abstract

Courageous citizenship has never been only a private virtue; it is an institutional achievement. Reading the Rosenwald Schools and the Jeanes Teachers as civic architecture, and tracing what displaced them, this essay argues that renewing the American pledge at 250 requires rebuilding the civic pathways that let ordinary people act with consequence.

The [Declaration of Independence](#) closes with a pledge that has echoed through American civic life for 250 years: a mutual commitment of "our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." This was not a flourish of sentiment. It was a public commitment to shared risk, shared responsibility, and shared consequence. Courageous citizenship, at the founding, names not simply a moral disposition but a willingness to act together under uncertainty and to accept the costs of collective action.

In the American tradition at its best, courageous citizenship has never been only a private virtue. It has been an institutional achievement sustained through associations, local governance, churches, schools, and shared practices that converted commitment into durable public action. Citizens did not merely speak or assemble. They acted through institutions that carried authority, distributed responsibility, and endured long enough for decisions to matter.

This essay argues that renewing the pledge at the Declaration's 250th anniversary cannot mean renewed sentiment alone. It has to mean rebuilding civic architecture – the durable institutional pathways in the everyday life of communities that allow ordinary people to act with standing and binding civic consequence over time. Courage is not only something citizens possess. It is something institutions either authorize or quietly prevent from becoming consequential.

The argument is grounded in one of the most concrete cases of civic architecture in American history: the Rosenwald Schools and the Jeanes Teachers who organized the network of Black educators that helped Black communities build schools and then sustain them across the segregated South from 1908 to 1968. That historical case did not call itself civic architecture. It built it. The work of those Teachers, and the Rosenwald-funded schools and libraries they helped build and then supervise, became the foundation of the American civil rights movement.

What was built – along with the practices and commitments that sustained it – was displaced. What was displaced has not yet been rebuilt, not just for Black communities

but for the country more broadly. That work of rebuilding is what courageous citizenship at the 250th anniversary now requires.

Rosenwald Schools and the Jeanes Teachers as Civic Architecture in Practice

For sixty years, from 1908 to 1968, Black communities across the American South built and sustained an educational infrastructure of approximately 5,000 schools, organized through a network of Black educators called the Jeanes Teachers and the Rosenwald program. The school building program, the Rosenwald Schools, existed from 1912 to 1932. The communities did this under Jim Crow, after the violent dismantling of Reconstruction's biracial governments, in counties where Black voters had been disenfranchised by amendment and lynching was a tool of public order. They did it on a fraction of the public funds spent on white schooling. The schools they built became the institutional foundation of the civil rights movement.

This is perhaps the most concrete case in American history of civic architecture built and held under the most impossible conditions. It is also the case the present moment most needs.

The [Rosenwald Fund](#), established by Sears and Roebuck president Julius Rosenwald in partnership with Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute, contributed up to one-third of the construction cost for each school it supported provided the community could raise the rest. Black communities raised their share – through fish fries and bake sales, but also through donated land, hauled materials, and direct labor. The balance came from public school funds, released only because the Black community match and the Rosenwald grant required white school boards to commit them.

The matched-funding model was itself a design move. Rosenwald, the son of Jewish refugees from European persecution and a believer in the Jewish concept of [tzedakah](#) – righteousness through giving – refused the terms philanthropy and charity. He believed people would not appreciate what was handed to them but would feel pride and ownership in what they built through their own effort. The form of the gift carried a civic claim: the schools belonged to the communities that built them. In Madison County, North Carolina, when the Long Ridge community needed an additional acre of land to qualify for Rosenwald funds in 1927, families bought it themselves and opened a two-room schoolhouse the following year. The schools belonged, in a real sense, to the communities that built them – and alumni of what became the Anderson Rosenwald School, including Dr. David Briscoe, have testified to that ownership across generations.

The [Anna T. Jeanes Fund](#), established in 1907 by a Philadelphia Quaker philanthropist, had a racially integrated board – unusual for the era. Its purpose was different from Rosenwald's. It paid for teachers, specifically, for the network that came to be called the Jeanes Teachers, mostly Black women educated at the era's HBCUs and normal schools, who organized communities, supervised schools, and built the relational infrastructure that the Rosenwald construction program would later draw on.

The first Jeanes Teacher, Virginia Estelle Randolph, was hired in 1908 in Henrico County, Virginia. She had passed the county teaching exam at sixteen. Her county superintendent applied to the Jeanes Fund for the position, then nominated Randolph to fill it; she would supervise more than twenty Black schools across the county.

By 1937 there were 426 Jeanes Teachers across the South, almost all women, most educated at the era's normal schools and HBCUs. The historian Valinda Littlefield has described them as essentially county superintendents for Black schools. They visited three or four schools a week. They supervised curriculum. They trained teachers in literacy, numeracy, and library skills. They organized communities to build schools, libraries, gardens, and health programs. They took leadership in church groups and civic associations including the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and, later, the National Council of Negro Women. They worked with attorneys, doctors, white school officials, and white philanthropists to extract resources for Black education.

Two-thirds of Rosenwald schools were built in counties where a Jeanes Teacher was employed. The correlation is not coincidence. The Teachers were the institutional pathway through which the schools came into being.

What this looks like in civic-architecture terms is direct.

- There were named maintenance owners: the Teachers themselves
- There were durable cycles: the annual reports, the supervisory visits, the parent-teacher associations the Teachers organized
- There was locatable authorization: the Teachers held county-level standing even when their formal titles understated their actual authority
- There were dated public artifacts: schoolhouses, libraries, commencement programs, school improvement leagues.

The work was repeatable across counties, sustainable across decades, and inheritable across generations. Authorship was not concentrated in exceptional individuals; it was embedded in the role, and it persisted as the role was passed forward. This is civic architecture before the term existed.

The Teachers were originally hired to enforce a curriculum designed to do the opposite of what they did with it. "Industrial education," developed at the [Hampton Institute](#) under Samuel Armstrong, was explicitly intended to acculturate Black students into accepting permanent racial subordination. Layla Treuhaft-Ali, in a Yale senior thesis on the political origins of industrial education, documents this carefully: the curriculum's original purpose was to keep Black southerners from voting and running for office by training them to think of themselves as not yet capable of holding power, and the manual-labor demands placed on prospective Black teachers at Hampton were severe.

The Jeanes Teachers turned the curriculum inside out. Treuhaft-Ali argues that what they built was a pedagogy of Black citizenship – one that encouraged Black children to feel responsible for solving problems in their communities while also questioning white supremacy. Industrial education became, in the Teachers' hands, a method for community development, leadership formation, and economic self-determination. Mabel Carney, a researcher who studied their methods, named the practice precisely: getting members of both races to "join forces and work together on urgent mutual projects." Treuhaft-Ali argues that interracial cooperation in the Teachers' practice was not a concession to white supremacy but a politically potent technique for destabilizing myths of racial difference.

In the daily life of the work, this looked like [Lucy Herring](#) in Buncombe County, North Carolina, the Jeanes supervisor whose words have come to title the historical work on her career: "We did move mountains." Generations of children who arrived at school with worn textbooks left having learned to organize.

The institutional bridge from this work to the civil rights movement is direct. The Citizenship Schools that the Highlander Folk School and, after 1961, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference operated from the late 1950s through the late 1960s, the schools Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson built and Ella Baker organized through SNCC, were direct intellectual descendants of the Jeanes pedagogy. The 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools were the same lineage extended. [Dorothy Cotton](#), who directed the Citizenship Education Program for SCLC, has documented how that grassroots training prepared the foundation of the nonviolent movement. John Lewis, Medgar Evers, and Maya Angelou were Rosenwald school graduates. The civil rights movement's leadership did not arrive from nowhere. It came up through the institutional pathways the Jeanes Teachers had been building for half a century.

[Charles Payne's](#) distinction between organizing and mobilizing names this analytically. The marches and sit-ins of the 1960s were mobilizing – turning people out for visible

action. They worked because the organizing had been done first, over decades, by the Jeanes Teachers and the communities they had formed into agents of their own civic life.

When civic architecture is in place, courageous citizenship can show up at scale. When it is absent, courage burns out.

What Was Displaced

The Jeanes Fund closed in 1968, a coincidence of timing worth pausing on. The same window that ended the legal regime of segregation also began a different kind of dismantling. The model for allocating Federal money flowing through the [War on Poverty](#) and Great Society programs reorganized civic life around service delivery. The organizing tradition that had built civic capacity in Black communities for sixty years lost its institutional ground in the mid-1960s, as attention turned from relational power-building to public administration. The work Jeanes Teachers had done was redirected into bureaucratic categories that did not know what to do with it.

[Robert Woodson](#), a longtime civil rights activist who later founded the Woodson Center, has described the mechanism precisely. In the first year of the War on Poverty, what Woodson calls "indigenous" community organizers – local, community-rooted leaders – were the people whom federal money reached. When those organizers began to challenge local political decisions, federal policy was changed: outreach workers had to be college-educated. The change sounds technical. Its effect was structural. A class of professional administrators replaced the community-rooted organizers who had been the institutional pathway through which Black communities authorized themselves into civic life. The work continued. The people doing it changed. The relationship between the work and the communities changed with them.

What followed over the next four decades was a broader regime of professional managerialism that consolidated the substitution. [Wendy Brown](#) has named the underlying logic with the most precision: a neoliberal governing rationality that recasts political life in economic terms, treating human beings as consumers, institutions as service providers, and freedom as the capacity to choose. [Michael Sandel](#) has named the same dynamic from a different angle, calling it the long substitution of a “skills market” for the older language of citizenship and common purpose. Across forty years of bipartisan governance, the diagnosis converges. Citizenship gets redefined as voting along the lines of consumer identity. Universities become job pipelines. Faith communities become program providers. The grammar of consumption replaces the grammar of citizenship.

[John McKnight](#) named the dynamic at the institutional level. In *The Careless Society*, McKnight distinguished between associational life, where people act as members with mutual responsibility, doing things for and with each other, and institutions, which deliver services to clients. McKnight himself learned community organizing in the Alinsky tradition, was recruited into federal government under the Kennedy administration, and developed his critique from inside the administrative apparatus. He saw what the displacement looked like up close. Institutions that organized professional service delivery quietly dismantled the associational life that had been doing the formative work.

The substitution this produced is the substitution at the heart of many of the problems the present moment is trying to name. Member becomes client. Co-author becomes consumer. Authorization to act becomes invitation to give feedback. Standing-with-consequence becomes voice-without-standing. The Jeanes Teachers' work, building people into agents of their own civic life through pathways the community owned, is exactly the work that gets crowded out when institutions reorganize themselves around service delivery to clients defined by need.

This story is not partisan. It is the bipartisan operating consensus of forty years. It indicts a regime of modern institutional management practice, not a party. Woodson's conservative critique of expanding federal administration and Brown's progressive critique of neoliberal market logic name pieces of the same dynamic. The point is not to assign blame for the displacement. It is to see what was displaced.

What was displaced was civic architecture.

Where This Leaves Us

When civic architecture is displaced, what remains is structural civic exhaustion. Schools, universities, workplaces, congregations, hospitals, and civic associations still function operationally. They process students, deliver services, follow procedures, hit metrics. But they no longer reliably give ordinary people durable ways to exercise responsibility and shape the future together. People are unsure whether they count, whether rules apply evenly, whether they can claim a meaningful place in the public world. Decisions do not carry the same shared recognition even when they are formally lawful. This is what civic standing and public authority look like when both have been destabilized.

The temptation in this condition is to respond with civic language: more dialogue, more engagement, more calls to courage and character. None of that is wrong. None of it is

enough. Civic language is everywhere already. What is missing is the institutional capacity to convert that language into consequence. We send people back into organizations whose rules, roles, and decision pathways still treat them as spectators. Under those conditions, courage becomes symbolic. It may be morally satisfying. It rarely produces durable outcomes.

This is not a moral failure. It is a design failure. Telling people to be brave does not produce courage when institutions reliably offer voice without standing. The work in front of us is not exhortation. It is the rebuilding of pathways in the everyday institutions of society through which ordinary people can act with binding public consequence – the rebuilding of civic architecture.

This is where Harry Boyte's tradition of public work and citizen professionals does the work the present moment most needs. Citizen professionals, inside institutions, carrying public formation into their everyday roles, are the necessary first step: they reopen the question of citizenship as substantive labor rather than procedural participation, and they show that the work can be done from inside the institutions we already have. Civic architecture is the next step in the same tradition.

Where citizen professionals carry civic capacity through the personal authority of their roles, civic architecture embeds the authorship in the structure itself, so the work does not depend on the presence of exceptional individuals and continues when they move on. That is what the Jeanes Teachers built. That is what the moment requires.

Recovery: Civic Pathways in Living Practice

Civic pathways re-engineer institutionally what the Jeanes Teachers practiced relationally. They do three things at once. They authorize action by making clear who has standing to decide and on what terms. They bind action to responsibility, so decisions are carried forward instead of dissipating into process. And they persist across time, allowing institutions to learn from conflict, failure, and revision rather than resetting with every cycle of participation. Civic pathways are the missing middle between voice and authority. They make citizenship consequential without breaking an institution's capacity to act.

Three layers of institutional work now extend the design grammar of Rosenwald and Jeanes into the present. The Texas HBCU Democracy Schools Alliance is the engine. The Politics Lab of the James L. Farmer House at Huston-Tillotson University is the institutional home that grew up to carry the frame. The Texas HBCU Legislative Caucus is the proof-of-concept. None was designed as civic architecture. All have grown into it.

The Texas HBCU Democracy Schools Alliance

The Alliance is the network of Texas HBCU students, faculty, staff, and community partners that has been building since 2019, when Huston-Tillotson University faculty reached out to [Central Texas Interfaith](#) – a Texas affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation – to develop experiential learning that would connect students' campus experience with politics in the tradition of strong meaningful citizenship. Strong meaningful citizenship is a practice older than the term: democracy and citizenship lived as egalitarian and inclusive ways of life, locally embedded, ideas-oriented, carried by people who learn to "let go" of control and work with others rather than for them or on them.

What grew from the partnership is what Alliance stakeholders now call broad-based cultural and community organizing – Central Texas Interfaith's tradition of training the leaders of community institutions, joined to the HBCU's tradition of democracy and citizenship as a way of life. The combination produced the annual Texas HBCU Democracy Schools Conference Series, which has now run for five years. The Alliance is the network of people across Texas HBCUs who bring that conference together each spring.

What the Alliance has built was not designed as civic architecture. It has grown into it. The Conference Series is a durable cycle. The Alliance is a multi-institution network with locatable authorization. [Freedom Schools: A Journal of Democracy and Community](#), published by University of Texas Press, is a dated public artifact of the work and a peer-reviewed record that has now reached its fourth volume.

The Politics Lab of the James L. Farmer House at Huston-Tillotson University

The [Politics Lab of the James L. Farmer House](#) is the institutional home that grew up to carry the frame. Huston-Tillotson created the Farmer House in 2022 to support the Alliance and to train a new generation of leaders in the civil rights vision of American democracy as a bold responsive inclusive community. Its vision is a world where strong meaningful citizenship shapes the future.

The Farmer House holds the theory of change the work has grown into: civic architecture in the Black institutional tradition – the design and construction of durable institutions that embed civic purpose, collective authorship, and relational power into the fabric of democratic life. The Alliance operates within that vision and carries the work across campuses. The Farmer House provides editorial leadership of *Freedom*

Schools and runs the Apprentice-Associate-Author pathway through which students at HT take partial ownership of real institutional work, learn alongside faculty and staff who have the skills, eventually run a full cycle, and are positioned to teach the students coming up behind them.

The formation logic runs both ways. The same cycle that develops citizens professionals inside a host institution forms civic professionals at HT – not through coursework about civic life but by carrying a real piece of institutional work under real constraints, where the civic dimension and the operational dimension are the same problem. People who have done a piece of civic-architectural work know what it feels like and are positioned to carry it into the next pathway, the next decision, the next breakdown. That is what the Apprentice-Associate-Author progression is for, and it is what the curriculum produces.

The lineage is direct. James L. Farmer Sr. taught at Samuel Huston College, the predecessor of Huston-Tillotson, from 1925 to 1930. His son [James L. Farmer Jr.](#) would later co-found the Congress of Racial Equality and the Freedom Rides. The years the elder Farmer taught at Samuel Huston were the years Jeanes Teachers were active across the South. The Farmer House inherits this institutional tradition by design rather than by analogy. It does not invoke the civil rights movement as inspiration; it carries the design grammar the movement was built on.

The Texas HBCU Legislative Caucus

The [Texas HBCU Legislative Caucus](#) is the proof-of-concept. It is a standing, bipartisan body inside the Texas Legislature that now carries an HBCU policy agenda across legislative sessions. It is the first of its kind in any state in the country. It is a piece of public civic architecture: visible, dated, ongoing, and consequential. Lawmakers from both parties show up to it. It produces results across cycles.

The Caucus is a direct result of Alliance efforts. After the inaugural Year One conference, Alliance stakeholders set its creation as a goal and began working with state lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to build it. In Year Two of the Texas HBCU Democracy Schools Conference series, students and stakeholders went to the State Capitol to make their case for a bipartisan caucus directly to lawmakers. State Representative Ron Reynolds held a press conference from the Speaker's Conference Room announcing his support. State Representative Yolanda Jones attended. Leaders from the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation network came in from Austin and Houston. At the Year Three conference in 2024, lawmakers announced the formal creation of the Caucus. Subsequent artifacts

include [House Bill 3296](#), which advanced to public hearing, and a state proclamation of Texas HBCU Day.

The Caucus matters here because it shows a non-HBCU institution – a state legislature – taking on a piece of HBCU civic DNA voluntarily, through partnership and relational work, because the institution's own actors came to see why the work served their public purpose. This is Boyte's "power with" rendered structurally. The dominant register was partnership and legitimacy, not confrontation. Pressure played a secondary role. Resources arrived through legibility more than leverage.

These are not novel inventions. They are continuations of the design grammar Rosenwald and Jeanees practiced – authorization, locatable responsibility, durable pathways – adapted to higher education and a state legislature instead of rural counties. The civil rights movement's next chapter is being written through institutions, not around them.

The Pledge Renewed

The Jeanees Teachers and the Rosenwald communities did not call what they were doing civic architecture. They built it. Under some of the worst conditions American history has produced, they made themselves the authors of a public life the country had refused them. The institutions they built carried the courage of one generation forward into the next.

What the country recognizes as the civil rights movement did not begin with the marches and the sit-ins. It began decades earlier, in the schoolhouses, libraries, and church halls those communities had been building. When civic architecture was in place, courageous citizenship could be carried at scale. When it was displaced – by federal administration, by professional service-delivery regimes, by the long substitution of consumer for citizen – the courage continued in individuals but could no longer be carried by institutions.

That is the work the present moment hands forward. The 250th anniversary of the American experiment is not a celebration of a finished story. It is a recommitment to a story that needs to be carried further. The pledge cannot be renewed in sentiment alone. It has to be renewed in form – through the rebuilding of civic architecture inside schools, colleges, congregations, workplaces, nonprofits, and public institutions, so citizens can act together with consequence.

The civil rights movement did not end. It is waiting for its next chapter. Courageous citizenship will be how that chapter is written, but only if we build the institutions that let the courage matter.

* Robert M. Ceresa is Associate Professor of Political Science and Founding Director of the Politics Lab of the James L. Farmer House at Huston-Tillotson University, an HBCU in Austin, Texas. His work develops civic architecture, the design science of the institutional pathways through which ordinary people act with standing and binding civic consequence, drawing on the Black institutional tradition from the Jeanes Teachers and the Rosenwald Schools into the civil rights movement. He is the author of *Cuban American Political Culture and Civic Organizations: Tocqueville in Miami* (Palgrave, 2018) and a founding member of the Braver Angels Civic Scholars Council.