



Nannie Helen Burroughs

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'The Bible, the Bath, and the Broom'

by Patricia Merritt

Nannie Helen Burroughs, best known for starting the Women's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention and the National Training School of Women and Girls in Washington, D.C., was a religious leader, educator, civil rights activist, and businesswoman. Burroughs also helped establish the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), a philanthropic organization.

Burroughs was born May 2, 1878, in Orange, Virginia, to John and Jennie Burroughs. John was born a free person of color who later became a Baptist preacher. Jennie, who was born a slave, later became a domestic servant. The widowed Jennie moved to Washington, D.C., in search of a better education for her five-year-old daughter. Nannie Burroughs graduated with honors from M Street High School in 1896, but was denied a teaching position because of her color. "I wanted to become a domestic science teacher," she said, "so that I could offer these women [domestic servants such as her mother] professional training that might help them earn a higher salary and afford better living conditions."

The rejection of this job would later fuel her resolve to provide educational opportunities for black females.

Burroughs moved to Philadelphia in 1897 and worked as an associate editor of a Baptist newspaper, *The Christian Banner*. A year later, she became a bookkeeper and editorial secretary for the Foreign Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention. The National Baptist Convention was the largest organization of black clergymen at the time and the national association of black Baptist churches.

While working with the Foreign Mission Board, Burroughs formed black women's clubs throughout the South that taught night classes in typing, stenography, bookkeeping, millinery, and home economics.

Burroughs was not shy in speaking her mind regarding the contributions that black women could make. At an annual meeting of the National Baptist Convention in Richmond, Burroughs "argued for the right of women to participate equally in missionary activities of the denomination in a speech entitled, 'How the Sisters Are Hindered from Helping.'" As a result, the Woman's Convention, an auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, was organized.

The Woman's Convention raised funds for missions to provide food, clothing, housing, and educational opportunities for poor people in the United States and throughout the world. Burroughs later served as the corresponding secretary and president of the Women's Convention during her 60-year membership.

On October 19, 1909, with the endorsement of the National Baptist Convention and the Women's Convention, Burroughs fulfilled her dream of creating a school for females. She opened the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C.

Burroughs referred to her school as the school of "Three B's—the Bible, the bath, and the broom." The core of the curriculum was the study of the Bible. Other courses included vocational training, domestic science, missionary work, social work, home nursing, clerical work, printing, dressmaking, beauty culture, shoe repair, and agriculture. Classes were also taught in grammar, English literature, Latin, drama, public speaking, music, physical education, and a mandatory course in African-American history.

In 1976, the school was renamed the Nannie Helen Burroughs School and offered coeducational classes for elementary grades. The Trades Hall building, built in 1927, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1991.

Burroughs was active in the National League of Republican Colored Women. She joined the group to influence the national party in behalf of African Americans.

In 1928, the Hoover administration appointed Burroughs as committee chairwoman of Negro Housing for the 1931 White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership.

Years later, as Burroughs continued to be concerned with civil rights and worked with the National Baptist Convention, she also met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Burroughs invited him to speak to the Women's Auxiliary in 1954. In a letter to Dr. King thanking him for his presentation "The Vision of the World Made New," Burroughs said, "What your message did to their thinking and to their faith is 'bread cast upon the water' that will be seen day by day in their good works in their communities."

Burroughs, who never married, remained as principal of the National Training School for Women and Girls until her death at the age of 82. She died of natural causes on May 20, 1961, in Washington, D.C.



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