

Highlights in Black History



Nannie Helen Burroughs
‘The Bible, the Bath, and the Broom’
by Patricia Merritt

At a time when blacks were discriminated against, women’s employment options were severely limited, and the races were legally segregated, a Christian African-American woman fought racism and ignorance with a prescription that included the Bible, education, and hard work.

Nannie Helen Burroughs was a religious leader, educator, civil rights activist, and businesswoman. She is 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. Burroughs also helped establish the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), a philanthropic organization.

“What we need are mental and spiritual giants who are aflame with a purpose . . .,” said Burroughs. “We’re

a race-ready crusade, for we’ve recognized that we’re a race on this continent that can work out its own salvation.”

Burroughs was born May 2, 1878, in Orange, Virginia, to John and Jennie Burroughs. Burroughs’s father, John, was born a free person of color and later became a Baptist preacher. Her mother, Jennie, was born a slave and later became a domestic servant. Seeking more in life for her daughter, the widowed Jennie Burroughs brought her five-year-old daughter to Washington, D.C., in search of a better education.

Nannie Burroughs excelled at M Street High School and graduated with honors in 1896, but she was denied a teaching position because of her color.

“My mother, like the majority of African-American women in cities, worked as a domestic servant,” Burroughs later said. “The work domestic servants performed maintaining homes was considered unskilled labor, and, therefore, paid low wages. I wanted to become a domestic science teacher so that I could offer these women professional training that might help them earn a higher salary and afford better living conditions.” The rejection of this job fueled her resolve to provide educational opportunities for black females.

After high school, Burroughs continued to seek a teaching position. When she did not receive one, she moved to Philadelphia in 1897 and became associate editor of *The Christian Banner*, a Baptist newspaper. It was only a year later when she accepted the position of bookkeeper and editorial secretary for the Foreign Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention (NBC). At the time, the National Baptist Convention was the largest organization of black clergymen and was 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 to the National Baptist Convention regarding the contributions that black women could make to the

organization. At an annual meeting of the National Baptist Convention in Richmond, Burroughs spoke out on behalf of her sisters: "I 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 of my speech, the Woman's Convention, an auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, was organized."

The primary purpose of the Woman's Convention was to raise funds for missions, which provided food, clothing, housing, and educational opportunities for poor people in the United States and throughout the world. Burroughs later became the corresponding secretary and president of the Women's Convention during her 60-year tenure with the organization.

With the endorsement of the NBC and the Women's Convention, Burroughs fulfilled her longtime dream of providing a school for females. She established the National Training School for Women and Girls on six acres of farmland in Washington, D.C., and opened its doors on October 19, 1909.

At the core of the curriculum was the study of the Bible. Specifically, the courses included vocational training, domestic science, missionary work, social work, home nursing, clerical work, printing, dress making, beauty culture, shoe repair, and agriculture. Classes were also taught in grammar, English literature, Latin, drama, public speaking, music, and physical education. Burroughs emphasized the importance of being proud black women and required each student to take a course in Black history. Burroughs referred to her school as the school of "Three B's—the Bible, The Bath, and The Broom."

Burroughs gained prominent supporters for her school such as Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. The pastor of the 10,000-member Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, Powell was on the board of trustees and helped Burroughs raise money for the construction of the Trades Hall building in 1927.



In 1976, the school was renamed the Nannie Helen Burroughs School and it later became a coeducational elementary school. In 1991, the school building was designated as a National Historic Landmark.

Politically, Burroughs became active in the National League of Republican Colored Women. She joined the group for the purpose of influencing the national party in behalf of black people. Her political activism caught the attention of President Herbert Hoover's administration. In 1928, his administration appointed Burroughs committee chairwoman of Negro Housing for the 1931 White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership.

In 1934, Burroughs founded the *Worker* quarterly magazine for missionaries, leaders, and workers in the churches, which gave her access to a national audience of thousands of women. Her editorials promoted the importance of African-American women in the church, and she told her readers, "If our leaders will only cooperate with us, read the magazine, use the material, study the lessons carefully, it will not be long before local [women's] societies... will know more about God's work, win more souls, and work more earnestly for the salvation of a lost world."

Years later, as Burroughs continued to be concerned with civil rights and work with the NBC, she also met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1954, Burroughs invited this young son of her friends Martin Luther King, Sr., and Alberta Williams King to speak to the Women's Auxiliary. Dr. King spoke to the women's meeting on the topic, "The Vision of the World Made New."

In a letter to Dr. King thanking him for his presentation, 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 her National Training School for Women and Girls until her death. She died at the age of 82 of natural causes on May 20, 1961, in Washington, D.C.