



## The Nannie Helen Burroughs Project

*(a values and vision initiative)*

[www.nburroughsinfo.org](http://www.nburroughsinfo.org)

Who was Nannie Helen Burroughs and why should we care? “We’ve heard about her; but, we don’t know about her”, President, Prince Georges’ County National Council of Negro Women.

Burroughs is important because she opened doors in religious and educational institutions, jobs, and society in general, to African-Americans (referred to as Negroes in her day), particularly for women and girls. Her good works spanned the spectrums of race, religion, gender and age; her efforts were acknowledged throughout the world. Yet, her legacy has been all but lost to history. Understanding the views, values and vision of this educator, religious and human rights advocate is critical to enhancing the lives of today’s society at large, and particularly our young people.

1879: Born in Orange, Va., near Charlottesville, Va. Her father was an itinerant minister, who was never gainfully employed. Her father passed and Burroughs’ mother brought her, at age five, to Washington to live with relatives and start a new life. Her mother worked as a domestic.

1884 -1896: Only information about her time in high school can be found for this period. In 1896, she graduated from M Street School (now Dunbar), where she was an above average student. The school concentrated heavily on the languages, which seems to be the reason for her great oratorical skills. She only wanted to be a school teacher, but was turned down for a position. She seems to credit it to her being of “Dark Skin”. This disappointment stoked the fires for her to declare that one day she would start a school in Washington for Negro Girls.

1897: She moved to Philadelphia and took a job with the Baptist Church. After a year the headquarters moved to Louisville, Kentucky.

1898-1997: She started and managed a school in Louisville for Negro women, which seemed to be a precursor for what was to come with her school in Washington. While there she took courses at a business college and received an honorary degree. There is no evidence of any other formal education. In 1944, Shaw University in Raleigh, NC gave an Honorary Doctorate Degree, the only institution to do so.

1900: While in Louisville, she attended the National Baptist Convention in Richmond, Va., where she managed to get herself on the speaking schedule. She gave the speech which launched her onto the national scene, “How the Women are being Hindered from Helping”. She was instrumental in raising the status of women in the Baptist Convention, thereby establishing the Women’s Auxiliary.

1901: She was elected as secretary to the auxiliary, a position she held until 1947.

1902: She traveled 32,000 miles doing the work of the Women's Auxiliary. Among her travels was the Baptist Convention in Birmingham, Alabama, where the convention had Du Bois on the agenda as keynote speaker. She lobbied the convention and persuaded them to allow Booker T. Washington to speak between the afternoon and evening sessions. A 1902 Birmingham newspaper article gives an account of the happenings on the evening, when more than one hundred people were killed trying to exit the church in what was thought to be a fire. It subsequently became known as the National Baptist Convention "Booker T. Washington Night".

1905: Her work in the Baptist Church earned her the keynote address position at the first congress of the Baptist World Alliance, the overarching Baptist organization in the world. Eighteen thousand people showed up in Hyde Park Corner, London, where people gather on Sunday afternoons to give their views on an array of topics. The Daily Express newspaper quoted one of the 'oratorical gems of this twenty-six year old African-American: "It is useless to telegraph to heaven the shiploads of blessings and no one to be on the wharf to unload the vessels when they arrive".

1907: She started Women's Day in the Baptist Church. Some years later, circa 1925, Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, told his Sunday audience of 500 that a day in the year should be named after Nannie Helen Burroughs, because the churches had raised significant funds from Woman's Day and her play, The Slabtown Convention. She responded in essence that she did not want a day named in her honor. Further, any contributions should be sent to her school in Washington, DC. Burroughs declared that she had started Woman's Day to teach women how to be leaders in the community, but the preachers have them "...dressed up, with baskets in their hand, prancing up and down the aisles begging for money".

1909: She opened The National Training School for Negro Women and Girls with friend, Mary McLeod Bethune, as the guest speaker. Burroughs, Bethune and Charlotte Hawkins Brown, all who founded schools, became known as "The 3 B's of Education". The education at her school was called Bi-lateral, reflecting a combination of the views of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.

1911: She was the main speaker at the second Baptist World Alliance Congress in Philadelphia, where 3,000 people were in attendance.

1911 - 1929: Burroughs ratcheted up her words/speeches/dialogue on Black Women's Suffrage, politics, discrimination and cooperation between the races, plus serving on many housing and employment committees, appointed by President Hoover.

1934: Burroughs was among the first women to give the commencement speech at Tuskegee Institute. She challenged the graduates, during that period of unemployment, to go out and find new ways accomplish the needs of the country, or "...Go before the Good Lord and be dismissed".

1940: She was appointed to the Advisory Panel of Listeners to the National Broadcasting Company. This was the path to her presenting a national radio address in 1943 to "US Fighting Men". In this address, she challenged the country to finally, 75 years after emancipation, give the

Negro his rights as a first-class citizen. However, she challenged the Negro to take responsibility for this opportunity. Burroughs always advocated for Opportunity, Responsibility and Challenge.

1947: She was elected President of the Women's Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention and served until her death in 1961.

Subsequent to her death, little mention has been made of Burroughs' achievements and contributions. She seems to have been virtually lost to history. However, in 1975, Mayor Walter Washington declared May 10th as "Nannie Helen Burroughs Day" in Washington, DC. Further, a street in her neighborhood (Deanwood - Ward 7) was renamed in her honor. Most recently, in 2014, the America Automobile Association visited the Washington Metro Area and presented Burroughs the membership denied in 1930.

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Nannie Helen Burroughs was known as a "truth-teller". For six decades (1900-1961), she spoke directly and forcibly about issues related to race, gender, politics and religion. Religious issues were addressed with extreme clarity in secular terms. Burroughs' in-depth analyses and directness seemed to "take us out of our comfort zone-zone", which may account for her absence from the history books. While fighting discrimination and racism, she was the ultimate protector of our Negro women and children. She concentrated on using our past struggles to shape the present, as we built the future for our children. Her views and vision called for us to:

- "Teach or children HOW to think, not WHAT to think (behavior, opportunity, responsibility and challenge)

Through

An open, honest and respectful dialogue (different views – liberal and conservative), first AMONG OURSELVES, about issues confronting our race and children.

Burroughs believed the strength of our race rested with our faith, family, ethical values, humility, determination and the courage to "do the superior thing" in the face of adversity.

She spoke of Hope, Pride, and Determination in telling the story of her grandmother, Maria Poindexter:

My grandmother was what she proudly called an, F.F.V. (First Family of Virginia) Slave. They tell me she was a remarkable woman, a seamstress and philosopher who would say "I was in slavery, but wasn't no slave. I was just in it. That's all. They never made me hold my head down and there was a whole parcel of Negroes just like me". That proud Virginian would say, "Hold your spirit up inside child, hold your spirit up, and that helps you hold your head up. Don't let your spirit down and that helps you hold your head up. Don't let your spirit down. Honey, they slaved my body, but they didn't slave my mind."

