

Dr. Sharon Harley, University of Maryland, on Nannie Helen Burroughs: *Journal of Negro History* 81 (Spring, Summer, Winter 1996): 62-71

In her article, "The Black Goddess of Liberty" Dr. Harley offers the following comments about why Burroughs seems to be lost to history. "As an educator, institution and organizational-builder, and major figure in the black church and secular feminist movements, Nannie Helen Burroughs was one of the best known and well-respected African-Americans of the early twentieth century. Yet, except for a few biographical entries and an essay or two, she is absent from most contemporary studies of African-American leaders and intellectuals. Quite possibly had she discussed her life in an autobiographical work, or had she been a male, she would be more widely known to historians and, thus, to more Black folk today. Her popularity during her life time and the availability of her manuscript collection in the Library of Congress should have afforded her a more central role in subsequent histories of African-American life in the twentieth century. How was it possible for a woman, who was a major figure on the black political, economic, and social landscape for the first six decades of the century, and whose views foretold some of the most compelling intellectual and ideological debates of the last four decades, not to have been given fuller consideration by scholars? Why is it that she is not more widely known by most Americans, let alone, African-Americans? To tell the story of Nannie Helen Burroughs' life as an intellectual is also to reveal how members of the black community and external forces designate who were the black intellectual leaders and race leaders, and how class, gender, and even skin color influence leadership designations at historical moments.

In her life and writings Burroughs both embodied and commented upon many of the class, and gender tensions confronting members of

the black community in the first half of the twentieth century. Some of these tensions continue to haunt us today in no small order because we either did not heed or were largely unaware of Burroughs' voice, which was too often drowned out (and, more recently, silenced) by our preoccupation with the lives and thoughts of a few notable twentieth century middle-class figures, such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois (more recently) Marcus Garvey, and occasionally, such females as Ida Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell. To be marginalized in this way is ironic, considering that her ideas and public life were an eclectic mix of Washington (she was sometimes referred to as "Mrs. Booker T. Washington") Du Bois and Garvey. Moreover, she exhibited the courage and principled position of Wells-Barnett, including her hard-hitting criticism. Like Terrell, she headed a major women's organization, the National Association of Colored Women..."

Among other things, Nannie Helen Burroughs was Principal of the school she founded from 1909 until her death in 196; started the Baptist Women's Convention in 1901 and served as Secretary from 1902 until 1947, when she became President of the Convention; started Woman's Day in the Baptist Church in 1907; founded Cooperative Industries in Washington and was named President of the Northeast Self-Help Cooperative in 1934; and, served on the Interracial Housing Commission under President Hoover. It is interesting to note that Burroughs in 1950 made an observation about the building of the apartment complexes throughout the country and stuffing Negroes in them, commenting, "... in 50 years the buildings will have been torn down and Negroes will still be worse off"