



Women's Day

By Alice Gantt

About the Founder...

Nannie Helen Burroughs, was a woman with a vision, a dreamer who had courage, love, determination, faith and devotion. She was an author, an educator, and the founder of Nannie Helen Burroughs School, Inc.

Ms. Burroughs was born in Orange County, Virginia, on May 2, 1879. She was the daughter of John and Jennie (Poindexter) Burroughs. After attending Virginia Union University, formerly named the Richmond Institute, her father became a preacher. Her mother was born a slave in Orange County, Virginia.

Ms. Burroughs attended public schools in the District of Columbia. She attended the M Street High School where she majored in Business and Domestic Science. Ms. Burroughs maintained high grades and graduated with honors.

After graduation, Nannie wanted to teach Domestic Science in the District of Columbia Public School System. Her goal was to assist Black women and girls in developing their skills. She felt that adequate training and preparation would assure them the possibility of gainful employment. Ms. Burroughs was unable to find employment in the District of Columbia. She wrote to Booker T. Washington in 1896, requesting work as a typist at Tuskegee. She wasn't hired for that position either.

Ms. Burroughs was a member of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, where she had many opportunities to develop her oratorical skills. Her pastor, Rev. Dr. Walter H. Brooks, encouraged her and all

of the young people in the congregation. He was a mentor and a friend. She served as the Corresponding Secretary of the Women's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention.



Ms. Burroughs moved to Louisville, Kentucky, in 1896. While in Louisville, she won great recognition for organizing a women's industrial club. This club offered evening classes in sewing, typing, book-keeping, cooking, and other vocational skills.

It was the National Baptist Convention in Richmond, Virginia, where Ms. Burroughs delivered her historic speech, "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping."

In January 1901, at a special committee meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, Ms. Burroughs made her dream known and put in her claim on the loyalty of the Negro Baptist Women to build a training

school for women and girls. Her goal was to train women for missionary work in this nation and abroad; to prepare women as teachers of the Word of God in Sunday schools; and to train them to offer better domestic service.

During the following months, she traveled all over the country, delivering 350 lectures, forming 156 organizations, and mailing more than 12,000 letters. Her concerns were, namely, Home and Foreign Missions, Christian Education, and building a training school for women and girls.

In 1907, Nannie Helen Burroughs returned to Washington, D.C. In the Northeast section of the city, she found an old eight-room house perched on a hillside, which had great gullies down its rolling sides where the soil had washed away. There was a "for sale" sign on the property. The price was \$6,000.00, \$500.00 of which was to be paid in ten days with the next \$500.00 in twenty days. Ms. Burroughs went back to Louisville to get the needed funds. She later purchased the property, which she named "God's Hill." The title of the property was taken in the names of L. G. Jordan, Julia M. Layten, and N. H. Burroughs—the three who were present at the meeting.

On Saturday, September 12, 1907, the women of the National Baptist Convention held a dedication service on the site of "God's Hill," the new training school for women and girls. During the next two years, the house, the barn, the stables, and the grounds were made ready

for the opening of the school. The barn and the stable, which were behind the house, became the classrooms and dormitory rooms.

In 1909, Nannie Helen Burroughs moved into the house at Lincoln Heights and opened the National Training School for Women and Girls. Thirty-one students enrolled from various parts of the country. But the property was still a wilderness of briars, weeds, gullies, and slippery clay. Ms. Burroughs, the women, and the girls went to work: cutting down the weeds and briars, filling the gullies, replacing the top soil, planting trees, cultivating a garden, canning surplus fruits, laying concrete walks, and sodding the hill.

Ms. Burroughs' faith in God and her great determination allowed her to plunge forward and make her dream a reality. Nothing could discourage her. When the water pump failed to operate, she carried water from the stream that flowed at the bottom of the hill. She canned vegetables and fruit from the garden. When the campus space became cramped, she purchased more acreage. She also urged people to make donations to provide salaries for the teachers.

The school that was started in 1909 has been through many transitions. It started as a school to train young women and girls. It is now an outstanding coeducational school with 125 students from nursery through sixth grade. The faculty and staff of 28 provide the students with a program that combines strong academics with a Christian environment. The school has numerous classes: Bible Study, Spanish, vocal music, physical education, art, computer technology, and instrumental music, along with the core academic curriculum. Enrichment activities afforded the students include extensive field trips, guest presenters, cultural arts programs, and a variety of school programs.

Christian instruction provides a strong influence throughout the school throughout the school program and each school day begins with daily devotions.

Nannie Helen Burroughs died May 20, 1961, in Washington, D.C. at the age of 82. Nannie served for fifty-two years as President of the National Training School for Women and Girls.

In 1964, the school founded by Ms. Burroughs was renamed the Nannie Helen Burroughs School, Inc. and in 1975. Mayor Walter E. Washington proclaimed May 10th Nannie Helen Burroughs' Day in the District of Columbia.

Ms. Burroughs was indeed a dreamer. Her efforts were tireless and her dream realized. We are the inheritors of her legacy. For that we are truly grateful.

The Purpose

The Idea, Purpose, and Plan of Women's Day was first presented by Nannie Helen Burroughs, the Corresponding Secretary of the Women's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention, in her report at the meeting of the Convention, in Memphis, Tennessee, in September

1906. The convention voted to accept the Women's Day suggestion.

Ms. Burroughs' proposal was for the fourth Sunday in July to known as National Women's Day.

The purpose of that day was to interest women of the local churches in raising money for Foreign Missions. This national day was proposed because the chief interest of the Women's Convention from its inception was to raise money for Foreign Missions. The Women's Convention then had its office in the Headquarters of the Foreign Missions Board at Louisville, Kentucky.

The Plan

In order to stimulate the interest of the women and foster their development. Ms. Burroughs suggested that the Secretary be permitted to prepare and send out programs, plus three special short but challenging speeches on Missions, written from research and study information about the Missionary enterprise. This day was not conceived for raising money but primarily was intended for raising up women.



The idea was given its first trial in July 1907. In keeping with her plan, Ms. Burroughs prepared and sent out “speeches.” The returns were encouraging. It was evident that the women liked the idea and the speeches.

Following is an excerpt of what Ms. Burroughs had to say about Women’s Day in the 1908 Report: “That last Sunday in July was accepted by you, at Memphis, as ‘Women’s Day.’

“We want all the women’s organizations in the local churches to cooperate with us in making Women’s Day a day of awakening consecration for the cause of Missions. It ought to be that every Missionary Society and educational organization in every church, would send for programs, make extensive preparation, and rally the people around the national standard, and report whatever was raised for Missions since that day has been set apart for that purpose; and there certainly ought not to be a woman officially connected with our National Organization who would ignore our appeal for help, and not send for programs, nor even mention the work we are trying to do.

“We are sure that in our lodges, when orders reach you from headquarters, that a certain day will be set apart, and observed for a certain purpose, every member would be found in line of duty. The same women belong to the missionary organizations that belong to the lodges.

“Why is it that we cannot make the last Sunday in July NATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY in deed and in truth? We are glad to report to you that this year we have come in touch with more societies than ever before. But even the number observing the day in 1908 is nothing compared with the larger number of organizations we have in our churches. If the women in the societies who report to us, will awaken others by calling attention to these suggestions, better results will follow.

“We can easily raise Five thousand dollars as Five hundred dollars. There are several societies that had successful meetings and reported every penny raised. There were

others who went into the dividing business and, of course we got very little. Some have not reported at all. Yet they used our speeches, programs, and music.

“May the Lord hasten the day when we shall not turn everything to our own account, and give the crumbs to the ones who have made possible our success. You must know that the preparation of the address, music, and programs require time and mental taxation. We are willing to make the sacrifice mentally and physically if it will help our cause; but it is painful thus to suffer while the missionary societies use the money for church expense. We have appealed to the State Presidents to recommend at their next session that all women’s organization observe Women’s Day and contribute the money raised to Foreign Missions.

“Surely it is possible through the combined efforts of the State representative to have one day on which we will all be aiming at and talking about the same thing. It will be a glorious day for our missionary organizations when such a program becomes an actuality. A million women praying! A million women singing! A million women desiring! A million women laboring for the coming of the kingdom in the hearts of all men, would be a power that would move God on his throne to immediately answer their petitions. It would mean spiritual dynamite that would blast Satan’s greatest stronghold and drive sin to its native health. Can we have such a day? God grant that we may, and thus hasten the coming of His kingdom.

“Let us, therefore, make the last Sunday in July NATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY and call on all women’s organization in our local church to cooperate with us in making this a day of awakening and consecration for the cause of Foreign Missions.” The Convention accepted the challenge. Why July?

Women’s Day was set for July because most State Convention activities had ended for the year, and workers in local churches are under less strain and would be able to give full time and attention to learning speeches and soliciting gifts, preparatory to the “Great Day.”

Besides raising money for Foreign Missions, Women’s Day was intended to raise the women themselves: training them for public speaking and informed leadership, through authentic, prepared, challenge speeches; teaching music; and techniques on how to get, willingly, larger contributions for Foreign Missions.

Ten years later, Nannie Helen Burroughs wrote that Women’s day had degenerated into some kind of rivalry to “beat the men raising money for the local churches. Child’s play. That is an easy thing to do and the men like it. Our purpose was to help our women KNOW and GROW. Only the recording angel knows how much good our national ideas have meant to our churches.

The late Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York City, had this to say to a great Sunday morning audience: “As much as the churches have gained from Nannie Helen Burroughs’ idea of WOMEN’S DAY and from her famous play ‘THE SLABTOWN CONVENTION,’ every church ought to set aside one Sunday in the year to be known as ‘NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS’ DAY,’ and send this woman every dollar raised on that one day in the year to endow and operate the school which she founded for women and girls in Washington, D.C.

The churches owe it to her. We are all getting more money off her idea of WOMEN’S DAY and her play, ‘THE SLABTOWN CONVENTION’ than we are getting from any other idea given to the churches in this generation.”

That same day, Abyssinian Church gave \$500.00 as an appreciation gift, and Dr. Powell made a personal contribution of \$300.00.

The purpose of Women’s Day has changed drastically since its inception. Our churches are now reaping a financial harvest for church building, improvements, and every conceivable local benefit. However, promoters are sent off each year to get a Women’s Day speaker, somebody who can draw a crowd. Had the original plan been followed, the churches

would now have well-prepared speakers of their own. Women's Day would then be a real educational and spiritual achievement, blessing the local church beyond imagination. Many women thus discovered and given the opportunity to develop would be "tops" in Christian service.

People would pack the church to see and hear their own discovery.

Women's Day, if properly used, would put women's feet in the path of service and lift their heads up to see the field ripe unto harvest. Women's Day should

be viewed as "Women's Supreme Opportunity," doing what the woman who talked to Jesus at the well did. That women "went to town" and brought the town out to "see Jesus."

Acknowledgments

Plan a three-day retreat for women leading up to Women's Day. Minister to the Whole Person. Plan should include:

- The History of Women's Day
- The Purpose and Plan
- Foreign Missions
- WOMAN as mother, wife, daughter, sister, and servant of God.
- Women's Issues
- Affirming Women (regardless of their choice of vocation — housewife or seeking employment outside the home).
- Women encouraged to affirm each other.
- Choose an organization to spend time with that week (Spouse Abuse Center, Rape Relief Center, or Children's Home).

Resources written by Nannie Helen Burroughs can be purchased from: Nannie Helen Burroughs School, Inc., 601 50th Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20019.

- *Address for Women's Day* (1976)
- *Here and Beyond*
- *How* (Revised 1992)
- *Making Your Community Christian* (1975)
- *Mother's "Sunshine"* (1969)
- *Circle Guide for Christian Young People* (1988)
- *Roll Call of Bible Women* (fourth edition)
- *On Their Way to the Slabtown District Convention* (1988)

- *Think on These Things* (revised 1963)
- *The Dream and the Dreamer* (1956)
- *Twelve Gates to the City* (1982)
- *12 Keys to God's Resources* (fifth edition, 1988)
- *12 Things the Negro Must do for Himself and 12 Things White People Must Stop Doing to the Negro* (reprint 1992)
- *Who Started Women's Day?* (1968)
- *Words of Light and Life Found Here and There* (sixth printing)
- *Secretary's Record and Minute Book*

Suggestions

- Nannie Helen Burroughs School, Inc. Established 1909
- Nannie H. Burroughs Publications 601 50th Street Northeast, Washington, D.C. 20019

Information for this newsletter was obtained from:

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