



Slavery Was A Success

By the time of an April 5, 1922 speech at the unveiling of The BTW Memorial Statue at Tuskegee Institute, more people had become aware of Nannie Helen Burroughs' extraordinary speaking ability. And, she was asked to address countless audiences across color lines on subjects ranging from religion to education to social injustice. Speaking bluntly and making statements others were afraid to say, Nannie often taught important lessons using expressions that would typically be considered offensive and taboo. As she voiced her opening comment: "Slavery Was A Success", the audience of 2,500, mostly African Americans, but some were white, was said to gasp in disbelief.

"Understand me" she continued, "I hate slavery. It was the wickedest institution known to man. But anything for which men are willing to die is a success. And white men of the south were willing to die to preserve slavery. Any man or anything that is that successful to that extent is worth studying. And, slavery is worth studying. What made it grow? In the first place, the slave owners owned the Negroes and they did three things with them---They woke their Negroes up; They made their Negroes work; and they brought their Negroes in. And they were willing to die for their slaves, because they knew their slaves were valuable. Further, they didn't leave those valuable Negroes to wake themselves up. They saw that they were awake in time. And after they had made them work, they did not leave them to run about at night. For, they knew the value of rest. And, after work, they brought their Negroes in.

Now slavery has gone forever and white men own slaves no longer. But Negroes are owned still. Every Negro in this house owns a Negro. Every one of you owns what the south was willing to die for. Are you willing to do for your Negroes what the south did for theirs. I have been thinking of what this institution here means. And, I have found out. That's what it means. Wake up your Negroes. Make your Negroes work. Bring your Negroes in. The thing is solved."

Those powerful words may have been difficult to hear, but she got her point across. One journalist who covered the event said her words struck her white listeners as hard as they struck the African Americans in the audience. He said: "Perhaps for the first time some of them realized that every white person owns a white person and should wake that white person up, and make him work, and bring him in."

