

**Nannie Helen Burroughs**  
**Daughter of Former OC Slaves**



**Nannie Helen Burroughs, by  
Rotograph Co., New York City,  
1909.**

The daughter of formerly enslaved parents, Nannie Helen Burrough was born on May 2, 1879<sup>1</sup> in Orange, Virginia to John and Jennie Poindexter Burroughs. Her father was a farmer and Baptist preacher while her mother was a cook. When she was five, Nannie's young sisters died followed by the death of her father a few years later. She may have had a grandfather known as Lija, the carpenter, who bought his way out of freedom.<sup>2</sup> After her father's death, her mother moved the family to Washington, D.C..

### **From the National Park Service:**<sup>3</sup>

"Around 1880, Nannie Helen Burroughs was born to a formerly enslaved couple living in Orange, Virginia. Her father died when she was young, and she and her mother relocated to Washington, DC. Burroughs excelled in school and graduated with honors from M Street High School (now Paul Laurence Dunbar High School). Despite her academic achievements, Burroughs was turned down for a Washington D.C. public school teaching position. Some historians speculate that the elite Black community discriminated against Burroughs because she had darker skin. Undeterred, Burroughs decided to open her own training school to educate and train poor, working African American women.

"Burroughs proposed her school initiative to the National Baptist Convention. In response, the organization purchased six acres of land in Northeast Washington, D.C. Now Burroughs needed money to construct the school. She did not, however, have unanimous support. Civil rights leader Booker T. Washington did not believe African Americans would donate money to fund the school. But Burroughs did not want to rely on money from wealthy white donors. Relying on small donations from Black women and children from the community, Burroughs managed to raise enough money to open the National Training School for Women and Girls.

"Even though some people disagreed with teaching women skills other than domestic work, the school was popular in the first half of the 20th century. The school originally operated out of a small farm house. In 1928, a larger building named Trades Hall was constructed. The hall housed twelve classrooms, three offices, an assembly area and a print shop.

"In addition to founding the National Training School for Women and Girls, Burroughs also advocated for greater civil rights for African Americans and women. At the time, Black women had few career choices. Many did domestic work like cooking and cleaning. Burroughs believed women should have the opportunity to receive an education and job training. She wrote about the need for Black and white women to work together to achieve the right to vote. She believed suffrage for African American women was crucial to protect their interests in an often discriminatory society.

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<sup>1</sup> A note in the files of the Orange County Historical Society from Michele Mason of the University of Maryland indicates that Nannie's birth was in 1875 instead of 1879.

<sup>2</sup> This reference found in Wikipedia was uncited. Author unknown. "Nannie Helen Burroughs". *Wikipedia*, Google, Accessed April 17, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nannie\\_Helen\\_Burroughs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nannie_Helen_Burroughs)

<sup>3</sup> Author unknown. "Nannie Helen Burroughs". *National Park Service*, Google, last accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/people/nannie-helen-burroughs.htm>

“Burroughs died in May 1961. She never married and she devoted her life to the education of Black women. In 1964 the school was renamed the Nannie Helen Burroughs School in her honor. Burroughs defied societal restrictions placed on her gender and race and her work foreshadowed the main principles of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The **Trades Hall**, now a National Historic Landmark, is the last physical legacy of her lifelong pursuit for worldwide racial and gender equality.”



**Nannie Helen Burroughs’s Trades Hall sits at the southeast corner of 50th Street NE and Nannie Helen Burroughs Avenue NE.<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>4</sup> Photographer unknown. “Nannie Helen Burroughs School”. *Wikipedia*, Google, Accessed April 17, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nannie\\_Helen\\_Burroughs\\_School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nannie_Helen_Burroughs_School)

### **Additional Information:**

Moving to Washington D.C. after leaving Orange County, Burroughs and her mother stayed with Cordelia Mercer, her mother's older sister (Burrough's aunt). At M Street High School, she organized the Harriet Beecher Stowe Library Society and studied business and domestic science. While there, she met Anna J. Cooper and Mary Church Terrell who were active in the suffrage and civil rights movements.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1898-1909, Burroughs lived in Louisville, Kentucky where she worked for the Foreign Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention (NBC) for forty-seven years. She was one of the founders of the Women's Convention which provided support for the National Baptist Convention. She then served as President of the Women's Convention for thirteen years. In 1896 she helped establish the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). When she became president of the NACW, she worked alongside Mary McLeod Bethune (vice-president) and Maggie Lena Walker (treasurer). Burrough's other memberships included Ladies' Union Band, Saint Lukes, Saturday Evening, Daughters of the Round Table Clubs, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>6</sup>

In 1908 Burroughs founded the National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C. and taught evening classes to 31 women who had no other means of obtaining an education. Racial pride, respectability and work ethic were part of her curriculum, and eventually women from all across the United States attended her classes.

In 1929 Burroughs worked with the Herbert Hoover administration on housing for African Americans for the White House Conference 1931 Home Building and Ownership.<sup>7</sup>

On May 20, 1961 she died in Washington, D.C. of natural causes and was buried at 19th Street Baptist Church where she was a member. Three years after her death, her National Training School was renamed the Nannie Burroughs School. The Manuscript Division in The Library of Congress holds 110,000 items in her papers.<sup>8</sup> In 1906 Mayor Walter E. Washington declared May 10 as Nannie Helen Burroughs Day. Nannie Helen Burroughs Avenue NE, a street in the Deanwood neighborhood of Washington, D.C. was named for her.

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<sup>5</sup> Hine, Darlene Clark (1993), *UNO e-Library: Uno.louislibraries.org*.

<sup>6</sup> Battle, Ursula V., *Nannie Burroughs Fought for Rights of Women, Afro-American Red Star*, February 3, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> "Herbert Hoover: Statement Announcing the White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership". *Presidency.ucsb.edu*. September 15, 1931.

<sup>8</sup> *Education: African American Schools: Manuscript Division, Memory.loc.gov*.

**From Orange County historian, Frank Walker:**

“With the adoption of the 1902 State Constitution...much of the concept and many of the gains of Reconstruction were wiped out. Blacks and poor whites were effectively disenfranchised and overt racial discrimination was the order of the day. The era of ‘Jim Crow’, the era of state mandated and legally enforced racial discrimination and segregation, was underway. A number of local blacks growing up in Orange County during Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras who did not have strong family ties or property ownerships holding them here, moved away. One of those was Nannie Helen Burroughs, who as a young girl in 1884 was taken by her mother to live in Washington DC. Nannie developed into a phenomenal educator, eventually founding the National Training School for Women and Girls in 1909. Religion and practical life lessons were taught alongside the arts and sciences, or as Ms. Burroughs put it, teaching “the Bible, the bath, and the broom.” She remained headmistress of the school until her death in 1961. The school, which continues in operation today, was renamed the Nannie Helen Burroughs School, and in 1975 Washington’s mayor proclaimed that from henceforth May 10 would be Nannie Helen Burroughs Day.”<sup>9</sup>



**A vocational classroom at the National Training School before 1930s.<sup>10</sup>**

<sup>9</sup> Frank S. Walter, Jr., *Remembering: A History of Orange County, Virginia* (Orange, Virginia: Orange County Historical Society, 2004), 203.

<sup>10</sup> Photographer unknown. “Nannie Helen Burroughs School”. *Wikipedia*, Google, Accessed April 17, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nannie\\_Helen\\_Burroughs\\_School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nannie_Helen_Burroughs_School)