

# Nannie Helen Burroughs and Institution Building: Reclaiming the History of Black Women in the Social Studies Curriculum

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In the early twentieth century in the American South, Black women teachers were especially dedicated to the creation of community and local institutions. They not only supported and taught Black history, but also created key texts that enabled a more accurate accounting of Black history.<sup>1</sup> Educational leaders such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown were not just educators, but political leaders as they educated parents, community members, and their students for citizenship and for economic self-sufficiency.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we present institution-building as a central thread to suggest ways that teachers can integrate the history of African American women into the social studies curriculum.



Clerical training class, National Training School for Women and Girls, Washington, D.C.

## Nannie Helen Burroughs and Institution Building

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, African American scholars were excluded from major academic journals, and their research received little recognition. Yet noted scholar Carter G. Woodson founded the Association of Negro Life and History, an autonomous organization that enabled Woodson to focus on the promotion of Black history. W.E.B. Du Bois worked for historically Black colleges and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. However, Du Bois struggled to establish a stable scholarly community in which to conduct his work. Black women's academic production was obscured to an even greater extent.

Increasingly, scholars are focusing on how African American women used their work in schools to generate sites for intellectual institution building. At the end of Reconstruction, educated Black women assumed a special responsibility of uplifting the black community. The “nation-building” work taking place at the time was centralized in the school space. Black women education

Students posed at National Training School for Women and Girls, Washington, D.C.



reformers realized that they could bring their knowledge and expertise to create environments for learning. The case study of the National Training School of Women and Girls founded by Nannie H. Burroughs provides a glimpse into how Black women constructed spaces that nurtured the intellect of Black children.

### **Biographical Sketch of Nannie H. Burroughs**

Nannie H. Burroughs was born in Orange, Virginia, in 1879, and later moved to Washington, D.C. She graduated from M Street High School (officially the Preparatory High School for Colored Youth) in 1896, hoping to become a teacher in domestic science.<sup>3</sup> She was confronted by racial and class discrimination in her job search and was unable to find a teaching position. This experience increased her desire to someday establish her own school.<sup>4</sup>

Burroughs moved to Louisville, Kentucky, in 1901 and worked as a secretary for the Foreign Missionary Board of the National Baptist Convention. While in this role, she fought actively for the equal treatment of women in the Convention. In 1909, with funds secured by the National Baptist Convention and its auxiliary group, the Women's Convention, Burroughs opened up a girls' school in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood of Washington, D.C.<sup>5</sup> The National Training School

for Women and Girls (NTS) sought to provide a place for African American girls to be educated and nurtured in a separate setting. Burrough's vision of industrial and vocational education was heavily influenced by Booker T. Washington and his vocational training school, Tuskegee Institute.<sup>6</sup> She believed strongly in the professionalization of domestic service—Black women's most prevalent occupation, after farm work, in the early twentieth century. However, this outward vision of industrial education was balanced with a strong belief in civil rights and a passion for Black history.

During the 50 years of NTS's existence, Burroughs did not have to rely on large donations from White philanthropists, but utilized smaller fundraising efforts and contributions from working class Black women. This approach was common among African American women teachers and leaders who wished to maintain the independence of their institutions. Burroughs was able to design a space that matched her vision of how black girls should be educated. She fashioned an Annual Appreciation Day, a pageant, and a course dedicated to African American history.<sup>7</sup> The pageant, "When Truth Gets a Hearing," which included poetry and musical selections, was designed to promote African American history and culture in the face of institutional and societal racism.

Burroughs died in 1961, and with her death a very particular vision of how African American girls should be nurtured and educated faded.

### **Teaching Ideas**

In what follows, we outline several ways to bring the work of African American women through the example of Nannie Helen Burroughs into the social studies curriculum. The teaching ideas focus on institution building in terms of Burroughs' establishment of a school for young Black women in the early twentieth century. Through these activities, we encourage students to consider institution building, power, race, and justice.

#### **Activity #1: Institution Building and Schools for African American Girls**

*Rationale:*

This activity asks students to consider the ways that leaders such as Nannie Helen Burroughs founded schools for African American youth. Using images from the National Training School, students will investigate perceptions of segregated schooling as well as the purposes of education as expressed through the curriculum.

1. Students will learn about the founding of Nannie H. Burroughs's National Training School for Women and Girls (NTS) in 1909 in Washington, D.C., a school she said was committed to the "three B's—the Bible, the bathtub,

and the broom.”<sup>8</sup> NTS educated and nurtured African American girls in a separate setting. Burroughs believed strongly in the professionalization of domestic service—Black women’s most prevalent occupation, after farm work, in the early twentieth century. However, this outward vision of industrial education was also balanced with a strong belief in African Americans civil rights, as well as a passion for Black history.

2. Students will then view the first image (on p. 33) and describe what they see. The teacher should guide them in discussing ways in which it looks like a typical classroom from a century ago. (There are students, desks, and a picture of Abraham Lincoln on the wall.) NTS Clerical Class, Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-92859 ([www.loc.gov/pictures/item/93515325](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/93515325))

3. Students will then look at two more images on page 34 and this page and compare and contrast these images with the first. What do they notice? Does this look like students engaged in school work? If yes, how? If no, why not? What do these photos tell you about the curriculum at the NTS? The photo “Students Posed at National Training School,” is from the Library of Congress, LC-USZ61-2149 ([www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003653786](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003653786)) and the second photo “NTS Cooking Class,” is also from the Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-92835 ([www.loc.gov/pictures/item/93515584/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/93515584/)).

4. After the visual analysis activity, have students take photographs of their school and its activities. They should then design a promotional brochure for prospective students, telling them about the engaging activities at their school.

### Teaching Activity #2: Pageants in the Black Community

#### Rationale:

This activity requires students to create a scene from the pageant similar to “When Truth Gets A Hearing,”

Library of Congress (LC-USZ62-92835)



Four African American women in cooking class, National Training School for Women and Girls, Washington, D.C.



written in 1921. Throughout the early twentieth century, historical pageants were extremely popular in communities and schools across the country. The performances addressed the rigid racial hierarchy African Americans endured between Reconstruction and World War I. In “When Truth Gets a Hearing,” characters such as Justice, Fairplay, Truth, Patience, and Freedom challenged the system of race-based segregation in the United States.

1. Students will view the image, “Pageant Players: Training School Girls Have Sung Themselves into the Heart of the World” (see above). The teacher should ask students what they see, think, and wonder about the image. After completing the see, think, wonder,

teachers will discuss the importance of pageants in the Black community in the early twentieth century.

2. Students will then read the excerpted version of “When Truth Gets a Hearing” (the full text is available at the Library of Congress). Students should reflect on the argument that Nannie Burroughs makes about social justice in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

The following text is an excerpt from “When Truth Gets a Hearing” that will be useful as students prepare for the pageant.

JUSTICE: I did not receive the summons, but I know I have some facts that will not be presented



**Student basketball players of the National Training School for Women and Girls, Washington, D.C., seated on steps for team photo.**

unless one of us present them. We four know the Negro better than anyone else. That's why we came together. I hope you will hear us. The Negro is not titled [sic] to the same rights and privileges as are enjoyed by other races. This is the white man's world, and we hope that you are not even thinking about giving the Negro an equal opportunity.

FAIRPLAY: Justice, your Honor, these witnesses know that this is the World Court? That this is the bar of Justice? Do they know that every race and nation under the sun is to be granted a hearing before you? Do they know that the Negro has a world claim? Do they know that he has labored, fought, bled, and died as willingly and as valiantly as any other race?

4. Students will then work in small groups of four to write their own scene from a pageant about a social justice issue that they care about. Students will then perform a five-minute scene from their pageant.

### Teaching Activity #3: Create Your Own School

Nannie H. Burroughs created the

National Training Schools for Women and Girls in 1909. She founded her school specifically for the purpose of educating African American girls.

Using the image: "Student basketball players of the National Training School for Women and Girls, Washington, D.C., [www.loc.gov/pictures/item/95505172/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/95505172/) resource" teachers can encourage students to brainstorm the types of challenges faced by Black educators who constructed schools during the period after Reconstruction.

After brainstorming the challenges, teachers should encourage students to envision building their own school. Students should:

- Decide what would be the purpose of their school—i.e., what would be the mission of their school?
- Determine a motto for their school;
- Decide how to publicize their particular school by using social media techniques;
- Describe key fundraising activities for their school or community.

### Conclusion

This history of African American women's institution building is a central theme in the history of the United States. From anti-slavery efforts to community building and uplift, to civil rights activism,

Black women have worked, fought, and taught others towards the end of building a nation. Integrating their history in meaningful ways ensures that future generations understand a fuller, more complex past. ●

### Notes

1. Alana D. Murray, "Countering the Master Narrative in US Social Studies: Nannie Helen Burroughs and New Narratives in History Education," in *Histories of Social Studies and Race: 1865–2000*, Christine Woyshner and Chara Haeussler Bohan, eds., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 99–114.
2. Sarah D. Bair, "Educating Black Girls in the Early 20th Century: The Pioneering Work of Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879–1961)," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 36, no. 1 (2008): 9–35; 10.
3. Opal Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).
4. Sharon Harley, "Nannie Helen Burroughs: The Black Goddess of Liberty." *The Journal of Negro History* 81 (Winter-Autumn 1996): 62–71.
5. Audrey Walker, *Scope and Content Note of Nannie H. Burroughs Papers* (Washington DC: Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 2001), 5.
6. Scholars are clear that Black women educational leaders defy easy categorizations as being either in the Washington or DuBois camp. See, for example, Sarah D. Bair, "Educating Black Girls in the Early 20th Century: The Pioneering Work of Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879–1961)," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 36, no. 1 (2008): 9–35.
7. Traki Taylor, "'Womanhood Glorified': Nannie Helen Burroughs and the National Training School for Woman and Girls, Inc., 1909–1961," *The Journal of African-American History* 87 (Summer 2002): 398.
8. Burroughs coined the phrase "the Bible, the bathtub, and the broom," to emphasize the values in her school's vision. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 213.

### References

- Trecker, Janice Law. "Women in U.S. History Textbooks." *Social Education* 35 (1971): 248–260. Woyshner, Christine and Jessica B. Schocker. "Cultural Parallax and Content Analysis: Images of Black Women in High School History Textbooks." *Theory and Research in Social Education* 43 (2015): 441–468. Shaw, Stephanie J. *What a Woman Ought to Be and D: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

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