

NOMINATION of Nannie Helen Burroughs for the COOPERATIVE HALL OF FAME Unsung Heroes

Nannie Helen Burroughs' life work is rooted in cooperative enterprise. For Nannie, the creation of cooperative businesses was to alleviate the suffering of African American communities during the Great Depression; communities which were severely impacted, especially economically. As a businesswoman her response was rooted in the cooperative movement. She argued that co-ops offered a better alternative to alleviate suffering. Nannie Helen Burroughs should most certainly be inducted into the Cooperative Hall of Fame for her involvement in introducing cooperative businesses to African American communities, promoting co-op education, and being a co-founder of an innovative cooperative in north east Washington DC. Nannie was a co-op statesman and educator. In addition, she was a champion of the US cooperative movement, and did this even more effectively because of her roles as a civil rights and women's rights activist and influencer. She was steadfast and persistent in her support of co-ops, and dedicated to promoting them as well as making sure they were successful. She used resources from some of her other successful ventures, such as the Training School for Women and Girls, to promote and support co-ops. For these reasons and more, Nannie Helen Burroughs should be inducted into the Co-op Hall of Fame.

Nannie was born in Culpeper VA on May 2, 1879¹. Once her formerly enslaved father, John Burroughs, died in Orange Virginia, at the age of five, her mother, Jenny Burroughs relocated to Washington DC. By 1883, Nannie moved to Washington DC, graduating with honors from the

¹ Findingaids.loc.gov. (2022). Retrieved 20 February 2022, from https://findingaids.loc.gov/exist_collections/ead3pdf/mss/2003/ms003010.pdf.

renowned M Street High School (now Paul Laurence Dunbar High School) in 1896. Despite her academic excellence, and at the beginning of her professional career she would be faced with a few closed doors and rejection from roles and positions for which she was more than qualified. She did not let anything stop her.

Nannie H. Burroughs was a founder of the National Baptist Women's Convention in 1900, which grew to become the largest group of African American women in the world.² "The church profoundly shaped Burroughs's understanding of racial, economic, and social issues which instilled in her faith in God's justice and deliverance for the oppressed."³ Nannie used Christianity as the infrastructure through which she made sense of the world, and considered herself a missionary to the least and vulnerable. Her involvement in education, civil rights and women's organizations put her in collaboration with many other leaders. This notoriety also contributed to her being an influential champion of cooperative business development.

Cooperative At Work: Visionary Leadership, Personal Commitment, & Statesmanship

Early in her career, Nannie Helen Burroughs brought together "six of her graduating classmates to open a Black-owned dry goods store" (Mason, 2008). To gain support of the community, Burroughs delivered a speech about it; and in a *Washington Post* article she fired back at an incorrect claim that the store would only serve African American customers. Burroughs stated: "While the enterprise will be run by colored men and women, believe us we earnestly solicit the patronage of both black and white. Trusting you will ever remember that our doors shall be

² Mason, A., 2008. *NANNIE H. BURROUGHS' RHETORICAL LEADERSHIP DURING THE INTER-WAR PERIOD*. 1st ed.

³ Mason, A., 2008. *NANNIE H. BURROUGHS' RHETORICAL LEADERSHIP DURING THE INTER-WAR PERIOD*. 1st ed.

thrown open to both black and white, and that every man shall be treated as man, regardless of the color of his skin” (Mason, 2008). This was the beginning of her notions of social entrepreneurship and the need for community-owned businesses.

Nannie was inspired by the consumer cooperative which began in 1880 named Rochdale Co-operative Society of the District of Columbia. The cooperatives continued to spread widely in DC especially after the 1933 Federal Emergency Relief Act that encouraged “the formation of cooperative and self associations for the ‘barter of goods and services.’”⁴ As an extension of the District of Columbia Emergency Relief Administration, the Division of Self Help, aided the establishment “13 self-help cooperatives” with Nannie being one of its 722 members (Parker, 1935).⁵ Before establishing a co-op, Nannie had already been an advocate for Black women’s advancement. She was instrumental in creating an impressive school, The National Training School for Women and Girls (1909), and later the Domestic Servants Organization (to provide a social center, lodging, classrooms, and safe places to work before 1927), in addition to founding the National Baptist Women Convention (1900). Developing cooperative business enterprises was a natural progression from her interest in helping Black women organize so that their voices could be heard, to providing multiple quality educational opportunities for Black women, to providing quality social and housing opportunities, to advocating for Black women to have multiple quality employment opportunities aside from domestic service. She found the cooperative business model to best serve the needs for quality and dignified, well paying jobs, that women had more control over, and communities could benefit from.

⁴ (Library of Congress, manuscripts, Burroughs foot note 9- Bockman)

⁵ Bockmon

On July 16, 1934, Nannie Helen Burroughs founded, and became elected to be the president of, Northeast (sometimes written North East) Self-Help Cooperative. The self-help cooperative, based on “women’s cottage” industry, began in response to the Great Depression, to “create jobs for low-income women in Lincoln Heights,” DC. The Northeast Self Help Cooperative was designed to “prevent pauperism, and train the unemployed and handicapped in self-supporting occupations” (Gordon-Nembhard, 2014, 150). The co-op was quite successful. In the first six months it became the largest sewing factory in the city, with 50 women members. And the canning unit boasted that it canned more than any other of the Black co-ops in the city (Gordon Nembhard 2014, 151).

As an example of her fortitude, persistence, and commitment, for two years Nannie attempted to get funding from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration’s Division of Self-Help Cooperatives for the co-op. She sent multiple letters of intent and proposals, and met with and corresponded with staff from the FERA, year after year. Finally in 1936 Northeast Self-Help Cooperative received a FERA grant of \$19,633 – one of the few if only Black co-ops to be granted such an award. They reorganized the co-op, and changed the name to Cooperative Industries of Washington DC, with Nannie Helen Burroughs and Sadie Morse Bethel listed as the founders. Cooperative Industries of DC provided “industrial education and the opportunity to work” to housewives, and trained “the unemployed and handicapped in self-supporting occupations” with co-op ownership (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 150).

Nannie extended her school, the National Training School for Women and Girls, in the service of the co-op(s), by providing space for meetings and for the original sewing and canning units. She was founder and president of the school, which had a trifold mission: (1) to train women

“without regard for social status or political loyalty.”⁶ ; (2) to ensure that young women can have an assured path toward being comparable to their counterparts, both men, and white women in select industries; (3) lastly to educate, uplift, protect all people by building cooperative businesses for people, especially African Americans, young women, and black communities. The National Training School set aside four classrooms for “the sewing unit, a room for the clinic, the kitchen for canning, as well as the dining room and chapel” (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p. 151).

Cooperative Industries of Washington D.C created a distinctive model, different from the English co-op model, by starting as a producer cooperative and sustained its efforts with government grant fundings in order to “create a permanent cooperative society” and later independently sustained through other relief methods (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p.153). With the federal grant, the co-op was able to grow and expand in new ways, buying a farm and adding a consumer co-operative component; mixing producer and worker ownership with consumer ownership. In one interview Nannie described the co-op as a cooperative project that embraced the community into a “group of industries and a farm” (Gordon Nembhard 2014, p. 152). At it’s height the co-op had 400 members in 1936 (high for a worker co-op); and although by 1938 the membership numbers were down to 87, these remaining members increased their productivity, and the co-op’s retail outlets were popular and sold to many non-members. The success and increase in productivity Nannie explained was based on the cooperative’s commitment to developing initiatives and self help, to reflect the constituencies being served through cooperative business.

The cooperative uniquely re-invested the surplus profits into two funds, one for emergencies and the other for education. (Gordon Nembhard 2014, p. 153). Nannie Burroughs

⁶ Findingaids.loc.gov. (2022). Retrieved 20 February 2022, from https://findingaids.loc.gov/exist_collections/ead3pdf/mss/2003/ms003010.pdf.

formed this uniquely designed co-op to teach people about cooperative businesses, while providing a “means of mutual helpfulness, to promote the general welfare, to obtain the necessities of life to advance our moral and material welfare as citizens, and to secure in a fuller degree the fruits of our labor, and a more equal distribution of wealth and opportunity for employment”; as stated in the preamble of the co-op’s constitution (Gordon Nembhard, 2014, p.154). Further, the co-op’s member recruitment documents illustrate Burroughs’ plan and commitment in ensuring those who joined Cooperative Industries would pay it forward by “enlarging the coop movement in the District in hopes of permanently building a city wide cooperative organization” (Gordon-Nembhard, 2014). The member recruitment aims highlight Nannie’s aspiration to advance the cooperative movement in general. Her commitment and dedication to cooperative ownership and her vision that co-op business ownership was the solution to unemployment and bad jobs are obvious in both the articulations of the mission of the co-op and the expectations of members, as well as in the explanations she gave in interviews about why she founded the co-op and what she hoped to achieve (Hope 1940 and Washington 1939). Nannie exemplified cooperative values through her commitment to advancing cooperative businesses despite economic downturns such as the Great Depression, when it was particularly hard for anyone to start a business or find work.

Still We Rise: Nannie Burroughs overcomes Hindrances to Advance Co-op Movement

Nannie utilized the cooperative strategy during the 1920s and 1930s, “a time when African-Americans experienced a renewed and coordinated assault on their identity as an American citizen undermined,” when their constitutional right to vote, and their social and economic status were hindered (Mason, 2008). Mason argues that Burroughs dedicated skillful tactful cooperative measures to match her rhetorical goals and the intrinsic demands of African American communities. Gordon Nembhard, in *Collective Courage*, argues that there was a collection of

misguided approaches and algorithms that limited the scope of Burroughs' reach and notoriety as it relates to her life's work (2014). Hindrances include relationships between women's roles in the economy, society, and cooperatives; women's occupational status; economic insecurity; preconceived notions of cooperative economic development; and women's access to capital (or lack thereof). In addition, there were perceptions that women's management capacity was limited - many men if they accepted women's management leadership at all they characterized it according to their agreeableness, and ability to collaborate only. Therefore, even when great women such as Nannie Burroughs arose, in advocacy, in approach, in strength, it was overlooked and purposely ignored. Nannie was one who believed in the diversity of ideas and worked tirelessly on ways to highlight those views and include the unique perspective of Black communities through her life's work, with one of her focuses on cooperation. Burroughs' lifework advances the central idea of working cooperatives in order to advance the cooperatives mission in all people living equitably with adequate resources being distributed for all people. While Burroughs in 1975 received recognition for education reform efforts for Black women by Mayor Walter E. Washington, who proclaimed May 10 Nannie Helen Burroughs Day in the District of Columbia; no recognition was given for her contribution to establishing and managing a successful cooperative business.⁷ We can no longer overlook Nannie's contribution to the cooperative movement, as she was greatly impactful to African American people and instrumental in the cooperative movement.

Nannie Helen Burroughs: Local, Regional, National influence and Inspiration

⁷ "Trades Hall of National Training School for Women and Girls (U.S. National Park Service)." *National P.U.S. Department of the Interior. (n.d.). Trades hall of national training school for women and girls (U.S. National Park Service). National Parks Service. Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://www.nps.gov/places/national-training-school-for-women-and-girls.htm>*

As an African American educator Nannie Helen Burroughs utilized education as a tool to encourage Black communities, especially women to join or begin cooperative businesses. As the founder of National Training School for Women and Girls (NTS), Nannie educated Black women both in D.C and internationally. Unlike other prominent Black schools, she created a vigorous and demanding curriculum for young women. In addition, NTS offered vocational courses such as dressmaking, handicrafts, power machine operation, public speaking, music, and physical education. Burroughs championed the principle of self-help cooperative businesses. Nannie also supported the co-op movement by allowing other cooperative businesses to utilize unused space in the school building.

As an example of how inspiring her co-op message was, in response to hearing about Nannie's establishing a co-op, historian Chancellor Williams wrote a letter of support (included with this application). He wrote to Nannie that the creation of the Northeast Self-Help Cooperative "is a timely and most important attack upon the most pressing social problem of our time." (Williams 1934). He later joined and became president of the board.

The women of Greenbelt, formed a chapter of the Better Buyers Club, an organization of housewives who would ensure the quality of products sold in their co-op grocery store through "food testing and price." The reputation of Nannie and Cooperative Industries reached their co-op, so much so the members decided to pay a visit on February of 1939. Upon arrival Nannie welcomed the neighboring cooperative and spoke extensively about Cooperative Industries. The group was impressed and inspired by Nannie and the cooperative's measures to match the goals and intrinsic needs of the African American community. A *Greenbelt Cooperator* newspaper reporter on the visit wrote a column about their visit. Here is an excerpt:

"Green belt visitors were impressed by the loyalty and common-sense manner in which deep-seated and difficult economic problems are being solved by the

members of Cooperative Industries, Inc., and it is evident that the program of self-education and self-help a none these people is bearing fruit in better standing between the white and the colored race while battling the common evils of depression and poverty.”⁸

Nannie is said to have labored 365 days, traveled 22,125 miles, delivered 215 speeches, organized a dozen societies, wrote 9,235 letters and received 4,820.”⁹ Each year, she motivated more women to become involved in their communities, and involved with the National Baptist Convention, and to promote the education of women. She also inspired people with a new agenda that would increase cooperative participation to further the movement. She co-lead organizations with notables such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Margaret Murry Washington, Carter G. Woodson, and more. She impacted the twentieth-century civil rights movement, and worked with and/or inspired Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Ella Jo Baker, Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy, and Thurgood Marshall. In 1954 for example, Marshall (who had lived in co-op housing) sent a thank you letter for encouraging him over the years, “All of us are forever indebted to you for the long hard fight you have made for our people. You will forever be an inspiration to all of us.”¹⁰ In 1957, almost two years later, Martin Luther King, proclaimed her as “The First leader of Negro women in America, it is imperative that you come to give hope to the thousands of women who are paying the price of sacrifice in our struggle.”¹¹ To white communities, she constantly demanded and encouraged them “to cooperate in building a just society.”¹² The response was astonishing. A white woman rose at the conclusion of Burroughs’

⁸ “Better Buyers pay Visit to a Unique Negro Cooperative.” 1939. *Greenbelt Cooperator*. (Greenbelt, Md.) 1937-1954, February 09, 1939, image 11. News about Chronicling America RSS. Retrieved March 3, 2022, from <https://www.greenbeltnewsreview.com/issues/coop19390209.pdf>

⁹ Morgan, “Torch of the World” See Morgan, *Forward*, March!, 102

¹⁰ Marshall to Nannie H. Burroughs, 27 August 1954, NBH Papers

¹¹ King to Nannie Burroughs, 2 November 1956; and King to Nannie Burroughs, 12 November 1956, NHB Papers

¹² Mason, A., 2008. *NANNIE H. BURROUGHS' RHETORICAL LEADERSHIP DURING THE INTER-WAR PERIOD*. 1st ed.

speech at a mass meeting in Lakeland Florida, exclaimed, “I do not deal in superlatives, but Miss Burroughs has given a matchless address. She is not only up to date in her understanding and analysis of great questions, but she is fifty years ahead of our time.”¹³

Conclusion:

Nannie Helen Burroughs was an instrumental force in cultivating, establishing, and advancing cooperative businesses. She was a co-op educator, advocate and developer. She was tireless in her efforts to raise money for the co-op movement, especially her own co-op, and to get the word out about co-ops and their potential to make life better, especially for Black women and Black communities. Let us honor her service by bestowing an honor that is rightfully, justifiably, undeniable due to her: a place in the Cooperative Hall of Fame. Historian Sharon Harley asked, “How is it possible for a women, who was a major figure on the black political, economic, and social landscape of the first six decades of this century, whose views foretold some of the most compelling intellectual and ideological debates of the last four decades, not to have been given fuller considerations by scholars?”¹⁴ How is it then, that someone, such as Nannie Helen Burroughs, who contributed so much to the practice of cooperative economics as an arm of social justice, not have been given her due?

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¹⁴ Sharon Harley, “Nannie Helen Burrouhs: The Black Goddess of Liberty,” *Journal of Negro History*, Vol 81, No. 1/ 4 (Winter- Autumn, 1996), pp.62-71

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