

# 2023 Strong Men & Women in Virginia History Student Creative Expressions Contest Eastern Region Winning Submission

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When considering hidden histories, the people who built the long-standing communities that allow generations of people after them to thrive come to mind. Community builders tend to slip through the cracks, standing quietly in the shadows. However, those who develop and lay the groundwork for a community have the most crucial role in supporting the next generation of innovators, by simply giving them the opportunity and space in which they can grow.

Throughout history, no one has better exemplified the role of community builder than Janie Porter Barrett. Born in 1865 to a domestic servant, African American social reformer Janie Porter Barret lived in the white household in which her mother worked before attending school in Hampton, Virginia. After this, Barret became a teacher and taught at both poor, rural schools as well as urban, academically ambitious schools. These various experiences gave her a wide perspective on the world, and she became dedicated to giving the next generation of African Americans a way to succeed, through academic, vocational, and ethical training.

Barrett returned to Hampton, Virginia, with her family in 1889, and quickly began doing work throughout the community. She first formed a sewing class for the neighborhood girls, which drew interest from others and spurred the creation of other groups. Barrett then founded the Locust Street Social Settlement and opened her doors to the people in the area, offering social services and numerous classes to the African Americans in Hampton to encourage community development. Barrett also helped found the Virginia State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs and acted as president of the Federation until 1932.

Through her interactions with her community, she realized that many young African American girls were in danger of being incarcerated. In response to this, Barrett founded the Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls, which aimed to provide vulnerable African American girls with vocational training and a place for rehabilitation. Barrett ran the school with a gentle philosophy, as she believed rewarding and supporting the girls would yield better results than harsh punishment. Her methods worked, and the school garnered public praise for its success. The Virginia Industrial School for Colored Girls went through many changes in its lifetime, first to co-educational and then to exclusively male, but remained a place of rehabilitation and support to a vulnerable population for over 90 years of its operation.



Barrett died in 1948, having left a great impact on Virginia society. Her work in supporting the African American community in Hampton paved the way for future success in the community and helped countless individuals along the way. However, since her death, Barrett's legacy has been largely forgotten by the public. Barrett's work was extremely important to the development of Hampton, and she deserves to be remembered as an integral agent of societal growth in the state of Virginia. It is our job, as citizens of Virginia, to remember and share her legacy so her contributions to society will never be forgotten.



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