Janie Porter Barrett
1865–1948

WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Janie Porter Barrett opened the first settlement house for African Americans. She became famous for her work to rehabilitate young African American girls who had been in prison.

As you read the biography below, think about Janie Porter Barrett’s approach to helping poor African Americans. How did she go about helping others?

At the turn of the century, most people living in cities lived in terrible poverty. American reformers concerned for the plight of the poor turned to a model used by reformers in London. Settlement houses provided a variety of services for people in need. Immigrants could learn skills to help themselves out of poverty. Settlement houses spread throughout U.S. cities at the turn of the century. Janie Porter Barrett opened the first settlement house for African Americans in 1902.

Janie Porter Barrett was born in 1865 in Athens, Georgia. Historians believe that her parents were probably former slaves. Barrett lived with the family that employed her mother as a housekeeper. The family encouraged Barrett to pursue an education, and her mother urged her to attend the Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia. Barrett graduated in 1884 convinced that it was her duty to work to improve the lives of all African Americans.

Barrett worked for five years as a teacher. In 1889 she married Harris Barrett, who worked as a cashier at the Hampton Institute. While Barrett was home raising her four children, she decided to offer weekly sewing classes to young girls in the neighborhood. Soon Barrett turned her classes into a club designed “to improve the homes and the moral and social life of the community.” Men and women of all ages joined the club to learn skills that would improve the quality of their lives.

In 1902 the Barretts added a building to their property to house the club known as the Locust Street Settlement. The club was the first of its kind in Virginia. Community members raised money to pay for the basic expenses of the center and to expand the programs it offered. By 1909 the Locust Street Settlement House offered nine clubs, as well as classes in art,
homemaking, gardening, and more. Staff from the Hampton Institute helped to teach.

When Barrett met an eight-year-old girl who had been in jail, she decided to focus her attention on young African American girls who had been in prison. In 1915 she opened the Industrial Home School for Delinquent Colored Girls with 28 students. The goal of the school was not to punish, but to rehabilitate. Girls learned practical life skills and gained an eighth-grade education. When they showed a sufficient level of responsibility, the girls were eligible for parole. As school superintendent, Barrett personally supported the girls who left the program to find work. According to a school report from 1916, “. . . success in controlling the girls has been unusual. Kind treatment and the honor system are the methods used. Some of them never knew what kind words and sympathy were until they came to the school.”

Barrett’s school was ranked among the best of its kind in the country. In 1930, at President Herbert Hoover’s invitation, she served on the White House Committee on Child Health and Protection. She was also active in the National Association of Colored Women.

Barrett continued to lead the Industrial Home School for Delinquent Colored Girls for nearly 25 years. She retired in 1940 and died eight years later. After her death, the school was renamed the Janie Porter Barrett School for Girls in her honor. In 1975 the school changed its name again, to the Barrett Learning Center. It continues to serve the community today.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** Why did Barrett open the Locust Street Settlement House?

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2. **Contrast** What was unique or different about Barrett’s approach to helping young girls who had been in prison?

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**ACTIVITY**

Identify a national or local organization that provides services for the poor. Make a list of the services offered by the group. Then make a list of the services offered by Barrett’s settlement house and school for delinquent girls. How are the approaches to helping the poor similar? How are they different? Which do you think would be most effective? Write a one-page paper comparing and contrasting the two groups.