2008 NOTABLE AFRICAN AMERICANS IN VIRGINIA HISTORY

"Fertilizing Barren Souls"
Comments by Janie Porter Barrett

General Samuel Chapman Armstrong founded the Southern Workman *in 1872 and published it monthly from the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia. "Fertilizing Barren Souls" by J. E. Davis, published in the* Southern Workman *in August of 1916, describes the Industrial Home School for Colored Girls that opened in Hanover County in January 1915 through the efforts of the Virginia State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Janie Porter Barrett was the leading force in the opening of this school and the article in* Southern Workman *tells the story of the how the home came into existence as well as describing the principles of the institution. The excerpt below represents Barrett's own words about her philosophy in helping troubled youth.*

When a girl comes into the school the first step is to get her body clean and give her a clean bed. No matter how sullen and ugly she is she is treated with the greatest kindness. Her name is written on a perfectly clean page, and she is told that she now has a chance to start all over and keep her record clean. I require her to tell me the whole truth about her past as soon as she can; she cannot do this at first, but I feel that in order to make the right start, there must be an honest confession; then, when I know everything, I understand better how to help. She is then told not to think any more about the past but to start all over. She is made to feel that it is in her power to be one of the best women in the world if she really wants to be.

If a girl goes through the day without forgetting a duty or failing to be quiet and ladylike from the very beginning, she is given the privilege of wearing a pretty bright bow, so dear to every girl, with her white collar when she comes to prayers.

The marking system is used, and when a girl succeeds in making an average of ninety-eight per cent for two months in succession she is allowed to wear a white waist on special occasions. When she succeeds in making an average of ninety-eight per cent for three months in

succession she is allowed to wear a white dress to evening prayers and on other special occasions. She is known as an honor girl. After a girl has worn a white dress three months, making an average of ninety-eight per cent, she is given a blue band which is worn on the left arm. An additional blue band is given for every three months that she keeps her good record. When she has received four bands she is ready to be paroled.

No girl can wear a white dress or waist who cannot launder it well. When an honor girl fails to keep to the standard she has to go back to the uniform, but she is given a chance to start all over again and work for the white waist and dress.

The honor girls sleep in honor rooms, sit at the honor table in the dining-room, and have privileges that the other girls don't have, which make the girls work all the harder to belong to the honor class….

Each girl will have at least two year's training and more, if necessary, before being paroled. Some are feeble-minded and should never be paroled. Those who are paroled will be placed in carefully selected homes where they will be given protection.

With the growing interest in these girls on the part of the best women in our state, it is going to be possible for them to get a protection and care that colored girls, doing domestic service, seldom get. Our plan is to keep in close touch with each girl after she leaves the institution. The women of the Federation will help them in every way possible and try to get the right companions and friends for them. The ministers have promised to help by seeking out the girls and inviting them to join their churches. I shall try to know a minister in each town to which a girl is paroled and give her a letter of introduction to him, so that there will be no delay in getting her under the protection of the church. In this way they will get in part the after care that is as important as the training in the school. With the best women, white and colored, working together with the State Board of Charities and Correction and other agencies doing uplift work in the state, it is impossible not to help these girls in a permanent way; and while we shall not be able to save all, our state will certainly be a safer place to live in because of the work of our institution.

Source: J. E. Davis, "Fertilizing Barren Souls" in Southern Workman *45 (1916): 462–473.*