

BARRETT, James D. (April 1833–1903), member of the Convention of 1867–1868, was born in Louisa County, the son of Wilson Barrett and Lucy Barrett. He and his parents left no traces in the antebellum public records, and an observer just after the Civil War stated that he had been a slave. The historian Luther Porter Jackson later wrote that Barrett was free before emancipation, but his absence from public records makes slave status more likely. Sometime before the war he married Clarissa M. Spotswood, and they had three sons and three daughters, of whom the eldest was born about 1858. As a slave or otherwise, Barrett learned the shoemaker's and carpenter's trades and, in his first appearance in Fluvanna County's records, he was taxed in 1866 as the owner of a horse valued at \$50 and other property valued at \$40.

Barrett soon became a leader and political activist in Fluvanna County. He was an excellent speaker who participated in the Union League's efforts to educate and organize blacks to seek their rights as citizens. On 17 April 1867 Barrett and two other African Americans represented the county at the Union Republican Convention in Richmond. When an election for delegates to a state constitutional convention was set for 22 October 1867, Barrett made known his candidacy. On 28 September at the courthouse in Palmyra he spoke at a crowded public meeting called to nominate a candidate to be Fluvanna's delegate. The chair selected two whites and two blacks from each of the county's six magisterial districts and, after caucusing, the committee recommended Abraham Shepherd, a white conservative and the clerk of the Fluvanna County Court. The meeting approved the nomination and adjourned, but Barrett

immediately announced that he would run anyway. About one hundred more blacks than whites voted in the election, and he carried the county by fifty votes.

Barrett did not play a prominent role at the convention. He served on the Standing Committee on Education and usually voted with the Radical majority but opposed controversial measures designed to disfranchise former Confederates. An observer stated that Barrett was honest and spoke well but could not read or write. His signature on his pay vouchers as a delegate suggests that he had, in fact, acquired at least some level of literacy, and he was described as literate in subsequent censuses.

Barrett evidently did not seek public office again, but he remained prominent in his community near Fork Union. He probably developed his talent as a political orator through preaching. He helped to organize the Thessalonia Baptist Church in 1868 and served as its pastor for many years. In April 1879 he conveyed three-quarters of an acre of his land to the church as a permanent site for its place of worship. In addition Barrett organized a beneficial society through the church. Members made small monetary contributions in return for assistance in time of need, and they named it the Barrett Humane Society in his honor. In the 1890s he also served as pastor at the Byrd Grove Baptist Church.

Clarissa Barrett died of consumption on 30 November 1891, and Barrett married Lizzie Myers on 4 September 1892. They had no children. James D. Barrett died in 1903 and was buried at the Thessalonia Baptist Church's cemetery.

Month and year of birth in Census, Fluvanna Co., 1900, corroborated by ages given in 1870 and 1880 Census and BVS Marriage Register, Fluvanna Co., but

tombstone gives birth and death years as 1820 and 1903; Personal Property Tax Returns, Fluvanna Co., 1866, RG 48, LVA; *Organization, Resolution, and Address of the Union Republican State Convention of Virginia* (1867), 2; Richard G. Lowe, "Virginia's Reconstruction Convention: General Schofield Rates the Delegates," *VMHB* 80 (1972): 351; Jackson, *Negro Office-Holders*, 1–2; *Lynchburg Virginian* and *Richmond Whig*, both 2 Oct. 1867; Election Records, no. 427, RG 13, LVA; *Richmond Dispatch*, 25 Oct. 1867; *Journal of 1867–1868 Convention*, 28;

Richard L. Hume, "The Membership of the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1867–1868: A Study of the Beginnings of Congressional Reconstruction in the Upper South," *VMHB* 86 (1978): 481; Pay Vouchers, Convention of 1867–1868, RG 48, LVA; Jerry L. Holloway, *The Churches of Fluvanna County, Virginia* (1966), 150, 157; Fluvanna Co. Deed Book, 21:496, 22:457–458, 25:288, 28:1–2, 29:277; first wife's death in BVS Death Register, Fluvanna Co.; por. in sanctuary of Thessalonia Baptist Church, Fluvanna Co.

Source: Hitchcock, William S., "Barrett, James D." In *The Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, Vol. 1, edited by John T. Kneebone et al., 356–357. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1998.



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