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Barrett, Harriet Glass (1851–1953)

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BARRETT, HARRIET GLASS (1851–1953). Harriet Glass Barrett, cook, nurse, mother, freedwoman, and WPA Slave Narratives interviewee was born enslaved in Walker County, Texas, in approximately 1851. Her death certificate listed her mother's name as Mary Viser. The identity of her father is unclear. Her interview was one of 300 chronicled in the late 1930s by the [Texas Writers' Project \(/handbook/entries/texas-writers-project\)](#) as part of the larger Federal Writers' Project under the Works Progress Administration, later the [Work Projects Administration \(/handbook/entries/work-projects-administration\)](#) (WPA). In it she shared memories of foodways, medical care, daily life, emancipation, and her experience in the [Civil War \(/handbook/entries/civil-war\)](#). Due to the scarcity of historical records on enslaved and recently emancipated [African Americans \(/handbook/entries/african-americans\)](#), much of what historians know about Harriet Glass Barrett's life comes from her WPA interview.

Harriet Glass lived in Madisonville, Madison County, Texas, which was formed from the surrounding counties of Walker, Leon, and Grimes in 1854. According to her interview, her father was born in Africa, and her mother was born in Virginia; however, twentieth-century census records listed their birthplaces as Louisiana, Texas, California, and Tennessee. Harriet's birth year also varied greatly in census records. She had one brother, Steve Glass, who had the same name as the man who held her and her parents in [slavery \(/handbook/entries/slavery\)](#). She was unsure if she had sisters. Before the Civil War began in 1861, Harriet's owner remarried after his wife died. Harriet remembered the second wife, Alice (Long) Glass, treated those enslaved "hard," unlike the first wife. Although young while enslaved, Harriet's primary duty was as a cook. She prepared meals of corn, deer meat, cornbread, and syrup and utilized the farm's garden and wild game killed by her owner. Called "Aunt Harriet" in her interview, she recalled that later others referred to her as one of the best cooks in town. She also learned to make homeopathic and folk remedies to treat illnesses, including various herbal teas and a rabbit's foot to treat chills, fever, and colic (see [FOLK MEDICINE \(/handbook/entries/folk-medicine\)](#)). Harriet and the other enslaved individuals lived in log houses that the owner locked and had patrolled at night. She and her family slept on beds made of stick posts, deerskin, and moss. Anyone who escaped was whipped and chained after they were caught. On Saturday nights, when they did not have to work, those enslaved visited other plantations and danced to music played on banjos and tin pans.

When Harriet was approximately ten years old, she had to travel to war with owner Steve Glass, who joined the Confederate military, to cook for him. According to her interview, Harriet also took care of the sick and wounded, including Glass who was wounded in the fighting on the Mississippi River south of New Orleans prior to the city's occupation by union forces in April 1862. She remained in New Orleans with Glass until the war ended and was there to witness those formerly enslaved celebrate their freedom and the end of the war. Her former owner told her she was free and offered her \$2.50 per month to cook for him and his wife. Back in Texas, Harriet worked for them until she married Armstead Barrett in a church in Madisonville on March 1, 1882. Her name on the marriage certificate read Harriet Sandles.

Harriet Barrett and her husband remained in Madison County for the remainder of their lives. The couple had six children, four of whom were living in 1900: daughters Tammar and Maggie and sons John and Thomas. The Barrett family farmed on rented land in the early 1900s. The Barretts' household often included members of their extended family, including grandson Elmore Tucker and an adopted daughter, Saphronia Green. During **World War I** (</handbook/entries/world-war-i>), Harriet's son, Thomas, served in the segregated 369th Infantry, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, who were loaned to the French military and served with the Sixteenth and 161st French divisions. Thomas Barrett earned a Purple Heart. In 1930 Harriet and her husband lived with his kin, and Armstead worked as a yard man. In 1937 both Armstead and Harriett provided their separate recollections of their experiences during slavery to the WPA Slave Narrative Project.

Armstead Barrett died in Madison County on June 9, 1945. Harriet Barrett died at home in Madisonville from anemia on March 2, 1953, and was buried at Hopewell Cemetery.

Armstead Barrett, *Federal Writers' Project: Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon*, 1937, Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn161/>), accessed June 10, 2018. Harriet Barrett, *Federal Writers' Project: Narrative Project, Vol. 16, Texas, Part 1, Adams-Duhon*, Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/item/mesn161/>), accessed June 7, 2018. Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821–1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).

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