



Vietta Garr



Vietta at the piano, Truman Library

Cook, Companion, and Friend

Vietta Garr worked for the Truman family as cook and housekeeper for nearly forty years. Her involvement at church and her leadership in a fraternal organization called the Knights of Tabor, as well as her position at the Truman home, made her a highly respected member of the African American community in Independence, Missouri. Vietta's life is an example of one of the overlooked stories of our nation's history: the African American domestic.

Vietta and the Trumans



Vietta worked with the Trumans beginning in 1928, and later went with the family to the White House. Truman Library

Born Ione Vietta Garr on March 21, 1896, Vietta grew up watching female relatives work as cooks and laundresses. She attended and graduated from the Young School, a school for African American children in Independence, and by 1920 was working in Independence as a house servant. Vietta began working in the Wallace-Truman home in 1928. Benjamin Garr, Vietta's father, had once worked for Bess Truman's grandfather, George Porterfield Gates, as a houseman.

In some respects, Vietta was like a member of the family. She helped raise Margaret, the Truman's daughter. She also served as a companion to Madge Gates Wallace, the president's mother-in-law. Not able to say "Vietta" as a young child, Margaret often called her "Petey" instead. They developed a strong bond that lasted into Margaret's adulthood. Vietta later accompanied Margaret on numerous concert appearances providing trusted companionship.

Vietta continued to work for the Truman family until 1943 when she was no longer needed as much at

the Independence home with Senator Truman and family spending much of the year in Washington D.C. She soon found a position as manager of the Crown Drug Store lunch counter in Kansas City.

However, in 1945, Bess asked Vietta to work for the family once again when Harry Truman became president. She accompanied the family to the White House to be a companion to Bess's aging mother. Although Vietta was never the official White House chef, the Trumans favored her meals. Truman requested that Vietta instruct his staff on how to cook the "Missouri Way." Vietta knew which foods each of the Trumans enjoyed. During their stays in Independence, she fixed steam-fried chicken or baked Virginia ham, her own special recipe for sweet potatoes, and the President's favorite angel food cake.

While in Washington, Vietta met many famous and influential people. She collected cards, autographs and other keepsakes, which she compiled into scrapbooks chronicling her travels.

Community Involvement



Vietta was a longtime member of the Second Baptist Church in Independence. Truman Library

Vietta was well known throughout the African American community, not only for her position at the Truman household, but also for her involvement in the Second Baptist Church and the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, a benevolent society for African Americans that aimed to spread Christianity and education, offer sickness and burial insurance, and a means for members to socialize.

Vietta took an active role in the society, serving as High Priestess, the leader of the Tabernacle. She served in this position for several years. Within the Independence community, Vietta's opinion was respected by both blacks and whites. She often

referred people from her church and organizations for domestic positions, including several people who worked on a part-time basis for the Truman family.

Church was an important part of her daily life and she was involved with many committees and special groups within the church. She played the piano and sang soprano in the church choir. She was known for her wonderful cooking and often prepared food for church gatherings

Retirement and Later Life

In 1957, the Trumans set up a trust fund for Vietta with \$5200 from their estate. Vietta continued to work for the Trumans, finally retiring in the mid 1960s. She never married.

Over the next few years, Vietta continued to be active in the community and her church. Following the death of Harry Truman in December 1972, Vietta was one of the few guests invited to his funeral.

Vietta was severely injured in late 1973 when her dress caught fire from a burner on her kitchen stove. She passed away on December 31, 1973. Her funeral was held January 6, 1974, at her beloved Second Baptist Church. One of Mrs. Truman's last public appearances was to attend Vietta Garr's funeral.

In her eulogy the pastor commented that Vietta was associated with diplomats and statesmen from many countries, yet she never lost her love of church and community. Vietta Garr is buried with her parents at Woodlawn Cemetery in Independence.



Vietta's home at 131 E. Farmer in Independence. NPS Photo



Vietta Garr (left) and Leola Estes, following Margaret Truman's wedding ceremony, June 21, 1956. Truman Library