



American  
Red Cross

# Founder Clara Barton

Clarissa Harlowe Barton, Clara, as she wished to be called, is one of the most honored women in American history. She began teaching school at a time when most teachers were men and she was among the first women to gain employment in the federal government. Barton risked her life to bring supplies and support to soldiers in the field during the Civil War. At age 60, she founded the American Red Cross in 1881 and led it for the next 23 years. Her understanding of the needs of people in distress and the ways in which she could provide help to them guided her throughout her life. By the force of her personal example, she opened paths to the new field of volunteer service. Her intense devotion to serving others resulted in enough achievements to fill several ordinary lifetimes.

## Civil War Service

Clara Barton was working as a recording clerk in the U.S. Patent Office in Washington, D.C. when the first units of federal troops poured into the city in 1861. The war had just begun, the troops were newly recruited, and residents in the capital were alarmed and confused. Barton perceived an immediate need in all this chaos for providing personal assistance to the men in uniform, some of whom were already wounded, many hungry, and some without bedding or any clothing except what they had on their backs. She started by taking supplies to the young men of the Sixth Massachusetts Infantry who had been attacked in Baltimore, Maryland, by southern sympathizers and were temporarily housed in the unfinished Capitol building. Barton quickly discovered that many were “her boys,” as she put it; she had grown up with some of them and some she had even taught. Like a few other women, Barton provided clothing and assorted foods and supplies to the sick and wounded soldiers on behalf of such organizations as the U.S. Sanitary Commission, although she never formally affiliated with any agency or group. She collected some relief articles herself, appealed to the public for others, and learned how to store and distribute them. Besides supplies, Barton offered personal support to the men in hopes of keeping their spirits up: she read to them, wrote letters for them, listened to their personal problems, and prayed with them. She knew, however, that where she was needed most was not behind the lines in Washington but on the battlefields where the suffering was greatest.



*Portrait of Clara Barton from the 1860s or 1870s.*

Barton prodded leaders in the government and the army until she was given passes to bring her voluntary services and medical supplies to the scenes of battle and field hospitals. Following the battle of Cedar Mountain in northern Virginia in August 1862, she appeared at a field hospital at midnight with a wagon-load of supplies drawn by a four-mule team. The surgeon on duty, overwhelmed by the human disaster surrounding him, wrote later, “I thought that night if heaven ever sent out a[n] . . . angel, she must be one—her assistance was so timely.” Thereafter she was known as the “Angel of the Battlefield” as she served the troops at the battles of Fairfax Station, Chantilly, Harpers Ferry, South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Charleston, Petersburg and Cold Harbor.

Barton was never satisfied with remaining with medical units at the rear of the column—hours or even days away from a fight. At Antietam, she ordered the drivers of her supply wagons to follow the cannon and traveled all night, actually pulling ahead of military medical units. While the battle raged, she and her associates dashed about bringing relief and hope to the field. She nursed, comforted, and cooked for the wounded. In the face of danger, she wrote, “I always tried . . . to succor the wounded until medical aid and supplies could come up—I could run the risk; it made no difference to anyone if I were shot or taken prisoner.”

The interest she showed in her “soldier boys” gave her a wealth of information about the men and the regiments to which they belonged. Toward the end of the war, she found herself writing to many families who inquired about men who had been reported missing. Here, again, she recognized a pressing human need and did something practical to address it. In the month before his assassination, President Abraham Lincoln wrote: “To the Friends of Missing Persons: Miss Clara Barton has kindly offered to search for the missing prisoners of war. Please address her . . . giving her the name, regiment, and company of any missing prisoner.” Barton established the Office of Correspondence with Friends of the Missing Men of the United States Army and operated it out of her rooms in Washington for four years. She and her assistants received and answered over 63,000 letters and identified over 22,000 missing men. Years later, Red Cross established a tracing service, one of the organization’s most valued activities today.

Barton climaxed her Civil War activity when she participated in establishing a national cemetery around the graves of the Union men who died in the notorious Andersonville Prison in Georgia. With the help of Dorence Atwater, who had secretly tabulated a list of the dead during his own imprisonment in Andersonville, and a team of 30 military men, Barton identified the graves of nearly 13,000 men. After Barton helped raise the U.S. flag over the Andersonville grounds at their dedication in 1865, she wrote, “I ought to be satisfied. I believe I am.” Coming events were to show, however, that she would never be satisfied except by responding again and again to the call of human need.



# The International Red Cross

When Clara Barton visited Europe in search of rest in 1869, she was introduced to a wider field of service through the Red Cross in Geneva, Switzerland. Subsequently, Barton read *A Memory of Solferino*, a book written by Henry Dunant, founder of the global Red Cross network. Dunant called for international agreements to protect the sick and wounded during wartime without respect to nationality and for the formation of national societies to give aid voluntarily on a neutral basis. The first treaty embodying Dunant's idea was negotiated in Geneva in 1864 and ratified by 12 European nations. (This is called variously the Geneva Treaty, the Red Cross Treaty, and the Geneva Convention.) Later Barton would fight hard and successfully for the ratification of this treaty by the United States.



*Portrait of Clara Barton by renowned Civil War photographer Matthew Brady, circa 1865.*

A more immediate call to action occurred in 1870 with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. Though not yet allied to the Red Cross, Barton knew the needs of victims of battle and went to the war zone with volunteers of the International Red Cross. To protect herself with the newly accepted international symbol of the Red Cross (the reverse of the Swiss national flag which bears a white cross on a red field), she fashioned a cross out of red ribbon she was wearing. Barton helped distribute relief supplies to the destitute in the conquered city of Strasbourg and elsewhere in France. She also opened workrooms to help the citizens of Strasbourg make new clothes.

## Founding and Leading the American Red Cross

Inspired by her experiences in Europe, Barton corresponded with Red Cross officials in Switzerland after her return to the United States. They recognized her leadership abilities for including this country in the global Red Cross network and for influencing the United States government to sign the Geneva Treaty. Armed with a letter from the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Barton took her appeal to President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877, but he looked on the treaty as a possible “entangling alliance” and rejected it. His successor, President James Garfield, was supportive and seemed ready to sign it when he was assassinated. Finally, Garfield’s successor, Chester Arthur, signed the treaty in 1882 and a few days later the Senate ratified it.

The Red Cross received our first congressional charter in 1900 and a second in 1905, the year after Barton resigned from the organization. The most recent version of the charter—which was adopted in May,

2007 restates the traditional purposes of the organization which include giving relief to and serving as a medium of communication between members of the American armed forces and their families and providing national and international disaster relief and mitigation.

The American Red Cross, with Barton at its head, was largely devoted to disaster relief for the first 20 years of its existence. The Red Cross flag flew officially for the first time in this country in 1881 when Barton issued a public appeal for funds and clothing to aid victims of a devastating forest fire in Michigan. In 1884, she and 50 volunteers arrived in Johnstown, PA to help the survivors of a dam break that caused over 2000 deaths.

In 1892, she organized assistance for Russians suffering from famine by shipping them 500



*Portrait of Clara Barton, August 20, 1904.*

railroad cars of Iowa cornmeal and flour. After a hurricane and tidal wave left over 5,000 dead on the Sea Islands of South Carolina in 1893, Barton's Red Cross labored for 10 months helping the predominantly African-American population recover and reestablish their agricultural economy. In 1896, Barton directed relief operations on behalf of victims of unrest in Turkey and Armenia, the sole woman and only Red Cross advocate the Turkish government allowed to intervene. During her last relief operation, in 1900, Barton distributed over \$120,000 in financial assistance and supplies to survivors of the hurricane and tidal wave that struck Galveston, Texas, and caused more than 6,000 deaths.

Although Henry Dunant had suggested in 1864 that Red Cross societies provide disaster relief as well as wartime services, Barton became its strongest advocate in the years that followed. During the Third International Red Cross Conference in Geneva in 1884, the American Red Cross proposed an amendment to the Geneva Treaty calling for expansion of Red Cross relief to include victims of natural disasters. Although some national societies were dubious, the resolution passed and became known as the "American Amendment" to the Geneva Treaty of 1864. Because of work like this in support of the global Red Cross network, several countries honored Barton with decorations, such as the German Iron Cross for her relief work in the Franco-Prussian War and the Silver Cross of Imperial Russia for the supplies provided during the famine of 1892.

The American Red Cross moved in a new direction near the end of Barton's tenure as head of the organization when we delivered supplies and services to Cuba during the Spanish-American War. Recipients of Red Cross aid included members of the American armed forces, prisoners of war, and Cuban refugees. This was the first time that the American Red Cross provided assistance to American armed forces and civilians during wartime.

## A Life of Contrasts

In addition to leading the Red Cross, Barton maintained interests in other fields, such as education, prison reform, women's suffrage, civil rights, and even spiritualism. Her force and independent spirit created opponents, but her charm attracted many loyal followers. She was struck by periods of severe depression throughout her life but always seemed to revive quickly when a major calamity called for her services. She rose early and worked late into the night. She was said to be somewhat vain about her appearance, particularly her hair, although she did not consider herself a pretty woman. She liked dashes of bold color on her clothing, especially red. "It's my color," she once said.

Barton had a talent for words. Ready to spell three-syllable words when she started school at the age of four, she wrote voluminously throughout her life, often daily. She was also a highly skilled speaker. Veterans attending her lectures were often moved to tears as she vividly described battlefield scenes from her Civil War days. Her charisma alone could rally volunteers to meet whatever crises threatened the country.

Despite these strengths, mounting criticism of her management style, abilities, and age caused Barton to resign as president of the American Red Cross in 1904. Leaving the organization she created, Barton turned her attention to establishing the National First Aid Association of America and served as its honorary president for five years. This organization, though small and short-lived, emphasized basic first aid instruction, emergency preparedness, and the development of first aid kits. Though Barton had promulgated these activities at the Red Cross before her retirement, it was not until several years later that we absorbed them into our own array of health and safety programs.

Clara Barton published several books about



*Clara Barton portrait by J.E. Purdy, 1904*

the beginnings of the American Red Cross and the global Red Cross network. She also wrote *The Story of My Childhood*, intended as one of a series of short autobiographies detailing aspects of her life which she never completed. She died on April 12, 1912, at her home in Glen Echo, Maryland, and was buried in the Barton family cemetery plot in Oxford, Massachusetts.

Barton's family donated her papers and awards, along with numerous mementoes, to the Library of Congress. The National Park Service manages what is now the Clara Barton National Historic Site in Glen Echo which is open daily for tours. Barton's legacy to the nation—service to humanity—is reflected in the services provided daily by the employees and volunteers of the American Red Cross throughout the nation and in troubled spots around the world.



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