A Tour of the American Red Cross's National Headquarters in Washington D.C — Travelling Back in History

This article describes the tour at the American Red Cross's National Headquarters (NHQ) that International Humanitarian Law Youth Action Campaign (IHL YAC) advocates attended as part of the 2026 in-person summit in Washington D.C.

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Since its first cornerstone laying ceremony in 1915 officiated by then president Woodrow Wilson and formed president Howard Taft, the American's Red Cross's current National Headquarters located in Washington D.C. on 430 17th Street holds an integral role in the organization as both a living marker of humanity's role in history, being a memorial dedicated to the "historic women of the civil war," and as a central hub to the American Red Cross's activities and planning (American National Red Cross, n.d.-b). In a tour of the headquarters, led by archivist Alison Polivka, advocates of the 2026 IHL YAC summit cohort added to their understanding of the American Red Cross and its nuanced history by engaging with various displays and relics from varying time periods of the organization within the building.

The tour began on the first floor of NHQ where Summit Representatives learned the backstory of the building itself and how it became headquarters. Advocates then went on to learn about the early activities undertaken by the American Red Cross, particularly in WWI, WWII, and the Influenza pandemic of 1918. Famous individuals who volunteered for the American Red Cross during that time were highlighted. One example is Ernest Hemingway, whose volunteering experience later inspired his world-renowned novel *A Farewell to Arms*. The tour also focused on major developments experienced by the Red Cross as an organization and for youth engagement. The tour covered key figures such as Mabel Thorp Boardman, a prominent leader,

and Jane Delano, who revolutionized nursing in the Red Cross along with the formation of a War Council and youth chapters in reaction to the war.

Advocates went on to see firsthand notable historical artifacts retrieved throughout the history of the Red Cross, including uniforms worn by volunteers during WWI, personal belongings of Clara Barton, relics of art such as the Tiffany windows representing post-Civil War healing, and antique pieces of media used for promotional purposes and recordings of monumental events like the signing of the Geneva Conventions. By chance, advocates had the privilege of interacting with a special showcase spotlighting important African American trailblazers throughout the history of the American Red Cross during the tour. Advocates were informed of the contributions made by individuals like Fredrick Douglass, who supported Barton in her creation of the Red Cross and doctor Drew Charles R., who revolutionized blood donations by inventing technology that elongated the lifespan of blood plasma along with countless other pioneers who worked to fight discrimination within the nation and the Red Cross.

Following the inception of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) by Henry Dunant in Europe, Clara Barton, having already witnessed firsthand the urgent need for a relief organization during her experiences in the Civil War, drew inspiration from Dunant's humanitarian work and formed the American Red Cross in 1881. The American Red Cross has since then gone on to become one of the largest relief organizations in the entire nation, collecting more than forty percent of the United States's blood supply and teaching first aid along with other lifesaving skills to nearly 16,000 people daily among other humanitarian and educational programs (American National Red Cross, n.d.-a). Its critical relief delivering operations results from over a century's worth of volunteering efforts and institutional advancements shaped by profound events in history and individuals who sought to preserve human dignity even during conflict. By preserving and acknowledging the American Red Cross's history and the multitude of stories it comprises through a tour, advocates help to honor the work individuals and groups have sacrificed for the mission of the red cross, for "the sake of alleviating human suffering in the face of emergencies."

Warm Regards,
International Humanitarian Law Youth Action Campaign Summit Representatives

SYNOPSIS: IHL YAC Advocates went on a tour of the AMRC's National Headquarters led by Alison Polivka, an archivist, during the in-person portion of the 2026 summit. Advocates broadened their knowledge of the AMRC's history by learning about key figures and seeing a collection of various artifacts, pieces of media, and artworks in the AMRC. The tour contained a special exhibit highlighting the contributions made by notable African American pioneers.

References

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