

Clara Barton

Founder of the American Red Cross

Spending her entire life helping others, Clara Barton (1821–1912) was a nurse, educator, government employee, ambassador of peace, relief worker, author, and speaker. The organization she founded, the Red Cross, helps millions of people each year around the world.



Clara Barton first learned to care for others when she was only 12 years old. Her older brother David was repairing a barn at their farm in North Oxford, Massachusetts, when he suddenly slipped. The long fall nearly killed him. For two years, Clara stayed by her brother's side day and night until he was well. Without Clara, he said, he would have died.

When she returned to school, Barton invested as much energy in getting an education as she had in taking care of David. By the time she was 17, Barton was hired to serve as the teacher of younger children. The school board decided she could handle the most difficult children. Realizing she was getting jobs that had only gone to men teachers before, Barton demanded a man's salary. She convinced the school board she was right.

In 1850, she decided to further her own education at a college in New York. Then she moved to Bordentown, New Jersey, where she taught in a private school. As she walked down the street, poor children asked her why there wasn't a school for them to attend. Her compassion caused Barton to leave the private school and start the first public school in Bordentown.

When the doors were opened, 600 poor children showed up wanting to learn to read, write, and do math. However, the public school board hired a man to supervise the school. He was jealous of Barton's popularity with the students and their parents. She resented the fact that a less qualified person was her superior. In 1854, Barton quit her job and moved to Washington, D.C.

Angel of the Battlefield In spite of the fact that no women worked for the federal government at that time, Clara Barton convinced officials that her

education qualified her to copy important documents. This job was done by hand. Barton spent her days copying page after page of documents. She learned in detail how government operated and how to get things done.

That knowledge was important when war broke out in 1861. Barton was horrified at the condition of the mangled soldiers who were shipped to Washington for medical treatment. She rushed home and began making bandages. She also wrote urgent messages to friends and family in Massachusetts seeking needed supplies.

Within a few weeks, Barton's home became a storehouse of food, blankets, candles, and medical supplies. However, there was no organized effort to get significant medical help to wounded men on the battlefield. Barton decided she must do something.

In 1862, the 40-year-old woman received permission to load a wagon with medical supplies and head right into the heart of the fighting. At the Battle of Cedar Mountain, Dr. James Dunn was completely frustrated. He was surrounded by bleeding, screaming, and dying men. However, he lacked supplies with which to help them. Barton arrived with her wagon of medical supplies. Dunn said when she appeared, he thought she was an angel sent from heaven to bring relief to the battlefield.

Reputation for Compassion By the time the war ended in 1865, Barton was known to people throughout the North. When families did not know where to find a lost loved one, they often wrote to Barton seeking her help. She organized a national effort to identify unknown soldiers. At least 22,000 families across the North were helped by Barton's efforts to learn the fate of their loved ones.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

The heart-broken friends appealed to me for help, and by the aid of surviving comrades, I gained intelligence of the fate of nearly one-half of the number of soldiers: I greatly fear there are some whose names stand today on the rolls against the dark word—Deserter—who were never faithless to their trust, who fell in the stern path of duty on the lonely picket line, perhaps, or wounded, and left in some tangled ravine to perish alone.

CLARA BARTON, quoted on the Red Cross website

Next came a series of speaking engagements, in which she encouraged Americans to help others. After the speaking tour, the exhausted Barton decided to take a trip to Europe to rest. In 1869, she traveled to Geneva, Switzerland. There, she learned of an international effort to ensure humane treatment of prisoners of war. The “Geneva Convention” was something Barton wanted the United States to agree to. She thought it would reduce the horrors of war.

In 1870, while she was still in Europe, war broke out between Prussia and France. Again, Barton wrote letters seeking help for the victims. Her letters back home brought money and supplies. The money was given to the Red Cross, which helped victims of war. Officials on both sides of the conflict thanked Barton for her efforts to help their people.

She returned to the United States in 1873. Back in the States, she continued to think about the Red Cross. It helped refugees—civilians fleeing from war—as well as wounded soldiers.

The Red Cross in America Thanks to efforts by Barton, both the Geneva Convention and the Red Cross became front page news in the United States.

By 1882, the U.S. Senate had ratified the Geneva Convention. At the age of 60, Clara Barton became the first president of the American Red Cross. However, Barton didn’t want the Red Cross to just help people during wartime. She wanted an organization that helped anyone who needed help during an emergency. When fires ravaged homes in Michigan, floods swelled the Mississippi River, and a broken dam destroyed the city of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, there was Barton with Red Cross volunteers to help.

In 1904, at the age of 83, Clara finally retired as president of the American Red Cross. She spent the rest of her life encouraging women’s rights and volunteerism. She also wrote her life story. When she died in 1912, people across the nation mourned her passing.

Review Questions

1. What was Barton’s first experience in helping someone else?
2. What were some of the jobs that Barton had in her life?
3. What was Barton’s main contribution during the Civil War?

Critical Thinking

4. **Recognizing Effects** How did being a good student help Barton?
5. **Sequencing Events** What were five important events in Barton’s life, and in what order did they occur?
6. **Summarizing** In what ways does the American Red Cross help people?