

A Brief Look at the Life of an American Heroine

Clarissa Harlowe Barton was born December 25, 1821, in North Oxford, Massachusetts. Her father was Captain Stephen Barton, a member of the local militia and a selectman (politician) who inspired his daughter with patriotism and a broad humanitarian interest.

When Clara was three years old, she was sent to school where she excelled in reading and spelling. At age ten, she assigned herself the task of nursing her brother David back to health after he fell from the roof of a barn and received a severe head injury. She learned how to distribute the prescribed medication to her brother, as well as how to place leeches on his body to bleed him - a standard treatment at the time. She continued to care for her brother long after doctors had given up. He made a full recovery.

Clara Barton on a 2021 stamp of Armenia

However, Clara was extremely timid as a young girl. To assist her with overcoming her shyness, her parents persuaded her to become a school teacher. She achieved her first teacher's certificate in 1839, at only 17 years old. This profession interested Clara greatly and helped motivate her. She ended up conducting an effective redistricting campaign that allowed the children of workers to receive an education. Successful projects such as this gave Clara the confidence needed when she later demanded equal pay for teaching.

In 1851, Clara decided to further her education by pursuing writing and languages at the *Clinton Liberal Institute* in New York. At this college, she developed many friendships that broadened her point of view on the many issues of the time. The principal of the institute recognized her tremendous abilities and admired her work. As a writer, her terminology was pristine and easy to understand. Her writings and bodies of work could instruct the local statesmen.

While teaching in Hightstown, Clara learned about the lack of public schools in neighboring Bordentown. In 1852, she was contracted to open a free school in Bordentown, which was the first ever free school in New Jersey. She was successful, and after a year she had hired another woman to help teach over 600 people. Both women were making \$250 a year. This accomplishment compelled the town to raise nearly \$4,000 for a new school building. Once completed, though, Barton was replaced as principal by a man elected by the school board. They saw the position as head of a large institution to be unfitting for a woman. She was demoted to "female assistant" and worked in a harsh environment until she had a nervous breakdown - along with other health ailments - and quit.

In 1855, Clara moved to Washington D.C. and began work as a clerk in the *U.S. Patent Office*. This was the first time a woman had received a substantial clerkship in the federal government - and at a salary equal to a man's salary. For three years, she received much abuse and slander from male clerks. Subsequently, under political opposition to women working in government offices, her position was reduced to that of copyist. In 1858, under the administration of James Buchanan, she was fired because of her "Black Republicanism". After the election of Abraham Lincoln, having lived with relatives and friends in Massachusetts for three years, she returned to the patent office in the autumn of 1861, now as temporary copyist, in the hope she could make way for more women in government service.

On April 19, 1861, the *Baltimore Riot* resulted in the first bloodshed of the American Civil War. The victims, members of the 6th *Massachusetts Militia*, were transported after the violence to the unfinished Capitol Building in Washington D.C. Wanting to serve her country, Clara went to the railroad station when the victims arrived and nursed 40 men. She provided crucial, personal assistance to the men in uniform, many of whom were wounded, hungry and without supplies - other than what they carried on their backs. She personally took supplies to the building to help the soldiers.



At that point, Clara identified herself with army work, and began her efforts towards collecting medical supplies for the Union soldiers. Initially, she used her own living quarters as a storeroom and distributed supplies with the help of a few friends - despite opposition in the *War Department* and among field surgeons. In August 1862, Clara finally gained permission from the Quartermaster to work on the front lines.

After the *First Battle of Bull Run*, Clara placed an ad in a Massachusetts newspaper for more supplies; the response was a profound influx of supplies. She worked to distribute the stores, clean field hospitals, apply dressings, and serve food to wounded soldiers - while in close proximity to several battles, including *Cedar Mountain*, *Second Bull Run*, *Antietam*, and *Fredericksburg*. Clara helped both Union and Confederate soldiers. Supplies were not always readily available though. At the battle of *Antietam*, for example, she used corn-husks in place of bandages.



Clara Barton – Union nurse – March 1865

In 1864, Clara was appointed by Union Gen. Benjamin Butler as the "lady in charge" of the hospitals at the front of the *Army of the James*. Among her more harrowing experiences was an incident in which a bullet tore through the sleeve of her dress without striking her - and killed a man to whom she was tending. She was known as the "Florence Nightingale of America". She was also known as the "Angel of the Battlefield" after she came to the aid of the overwhelmed surgeon on duty following the battle of *Cedar Mountain* in Northern Virginia in August 1862. She arrived at that field hospital at midnight with a large amount of supplies to help the severely wounded soldiers. She also served troops at the battles of *Fairfax Station*, *Chantilly*, *Harpers Ferry*, *South Mountain*, *Charleston*, *Petersburg* and *Cold Harbor*.

After the Civil War, Clara discovered that thousands of letters from distraught relatives to the *War Department* were going unanswered because the soldiers they were asking about were buried in unmarked graves. Many of these soldiers were labeled as "missing". Motivated to do more about the situation, she contacted President Lincoln in hopes that she would be allowed to respond officially to these unanswered inquiries. She was given permission, and "The Search for the Missing Men" commenced.

Clara then ran the *Office of Missing Soldiers* in Washington, D.C. The mission was to find or identify soldiers killed or missing in action. She and her assistants wrote 41,855 replies to inquiries, and helped locate more than 22,000 missing men. Clara spent the summer of 1865 helping find, identify, and properly bury 13,000 individuals who died at *Andersonville*, a Confederate prisoner-of-war camp in Georgia. She continued this task over the next four years, burying 20,000 more Union soldiers and marking their graves.

Between 1865 and 1868, Clara delivered lectures around the country about her wartime experiences, achieving widespread recognition. During this time, she met Susan B. Anthony and began an association with the woman's suffrage movement. She also became acquainted with Frederick Douglass and became an activist for civil rights. However, after her countrywide tour, she was both mentally and physically exhausted and under doctor's orders to go somewhere that would take her far from her current work. She closed the *Office of Missing Soldiers* in 1868 and traveled to Europe. In 1869, during a visit to Geneva, Switzerland, Clara was introduced to the *Red Cross* there. She was later invited to be the representative for the American branch of the *Red Cross*.

In 1870, at the beginning of the *Franco-Prussian War*, Clara assisted the Grand Duchess of Baden in the preparation of military hospitals. In 1871, she superintended the supplying of work to aid the poor of Strasbourg after the *Siege of Paris*, and had charge of the public distribution of supplies to the destitute people of Paris. At the close of the war, she received honorable decorations of the *Golden Cross of Baden* and the *Prussian Iron Cross*.

Clara then returned to the U.S., and in 1873, she inaugurated a movement to gain recognition for the *Red Cross* by the U.S. government. In 1878, she met with President Rutherford B. Hayes, who expressed the opinion of most Americans at that time - which was the U.S. would never again face a calamity like the Civil War – therefore the *Red Cross* was not really needed. Clara finally succeeded with President Chester Arthur, arguing that the new *American Red Cross* could respond to crises other than war - such as natural disasters like earthquakes, forest fires, and hurricanes.

Clara became President of the *American Red Cross*, which on May 21, 1881, held its first official meeting at her apartment in Washington, DC. The society's role changed with the advent of the Spanish–American War, during which it aided refugees and prisoners of the war. Once the Spanish–American War was over, the grateful people of Santiago built a statue in honor of Clara in the town square, which still stands today. In the U.S., Clara was praised in numerous newspapers for her efforts.

In 1884, Clara helped in the aftermath of the floods on the Ohio river, provided Texas with food and supplies during the famine of 1887, took aid workers to Illinois in 1888 after a tornado, and that same year took workers to Florida for the yellow fever epidemic. Within days after the *Johnstown Flood* in 1889, she led her delegation of 50 doctors and nurses in response. In 1896, responding to the humanitarian crisis in the Ottoman Empire of the Hamidian massacres, Clara arrived in Constantinople to provide relief efforts. Also in 1896, Clara traveled to Armenia, providing relief and humanitarian aid to the Armenian population who were victims of the massacres done in 1894-1896 by the Ottoman



Empire. In 1898, she worked in hospitals in Cuba at age 77. Her last field operation as President of the *American Red Cross* was helping victims of the Galveston hurricane in 1900. The operation established an orphanage for children.

After resigning from the *American Red Cross*, Clara founded the *National First Aid Society*, while continuing to live in Glen Echo, Maryland. She published her autobiography in 1908, entitled: *The Story of My Childhood*. On April 12, 1912, Clara died of pneumonia in her home at age 90.

Clara Barton – Photo by James E. Purdy (1904)

In 1973, Clara was inducted into the *National Women's Hall of Fame*. In 1975, the *Clara Barton National Historic Site* was established as a unit of the *National Park Service*. It was located at Clara's home in Glen Echo, where she spent the last 15 years of her life. As the first National Historic Site dedicated to the accomplishments of a woman, it preserves the early history of the *American Red Cross*. The North Oxford, Massachusetts, house in which Clara was born, is now also a museum.

Back in 1869, Clara had closed the *Missing Soldiers Office* when she headed off to Europe. The third floor of the old boardinghouse where she lived was finally boarded up in 1913, and the site of the old office was forgotten. The site was "lost" in part because Washington, DC realigned its addressing system in the 1870s.

In 1997, a *General Services Administration* carpenter was hired to check out the old building prior to demolition. While doing so, he found a treasure trove of Barton items in the attic, including signs, clothing, Civil War soldier's socks, an army tent, Civil War-era newspapers, and many documents relating to the *Office of Missing Soldiers*. This discovery led to the *NPS* saving the building from demolition. It took years, however, for the site to be restored. Finally, in 2015, the *Clara Barton's Missing Soldiers Office Museum* opened, and is being run by the *National Museum of Civil War Medicine*.

An American Heroine