

# Women's History Month

# Clara Barton

Volume 2, Issue 4

March 2024



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

**“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”  
– Clara Barton**

In 1894, a British journal declared that no American autobiography “would constitute so thrilling and so fascinating a narrative as that of Miss Clara Barton.”<sup>1</sup> Clarissa “Clara” Barton was born on December 25, 1821 in Oxford, Massachusetts. She was the youngest of Stephen and Sarah Barton’s five children. As a child, Barton was timid and awkward. By the time she was a teenager, her parents worried what future such a timid individual might have so they consulted a well-known lecturer who was visiting their town. “She will never assert herself for herself” they were told, “but for others, she will be perfectly fearless.”<sup>2</sup>

The famous lecturer believed that she would thrive if given responsibility and suggested she become a teacher when old enough. Clara was only 18 years old when she stood before her first class. Her first act was to have her students read aloud one of her favorite

Bible passages—the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” It was an ironic beginning to a career that was marked by so much war and human suffering and yet it was a fitting beginning to a life that brought so much healing and comfort.

By 1854, Barton moved to Washington, D.C. to take a job as a recording clerk at the U.S. Patent Office, the first woman appointed to such a post. She quickly developed a reputation for her hard work and sharp mind and found herself moving in influential circles. She was in the crowd for the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln and later described the “loud, fine voice” with which he delivered his address. From his words that day, she knew that difficult days were coming, and she soon quit her job to serve the thousands of Union troops that poured into the nation’s capital. Soon, Barton was roaming the camps distributing supplies that she had collected from churches and sewing circles. She wrote letters for the soldiers and took it upon herself to notify their families of their condition when they became ill. After the First Battle of Bull Run, she watched the wounded and shattered army straggle back into the capital recalling that she picked out those “who looked the worst and limped the hardest” and drew them into her own quarters, to see what could be done for them.”<sup>4</sup>

Barton’s services proved to be so valuable that by 1862, she received permission to transport supplies to battlefields up and down the East Coast. She was at every major battle in Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina, often standing directly behind the lines of artillery. When there were gaps in the fighting, she would roam among the wounded with crackers and bread pinned up in the hem of her skirt, giving them nourishment and tending to their wounds. The once timid, awkward child now seemed to be perfectly fearless and earned the nickname the “Angel of the Battlefield.” When the war was over, Barton’s work

continued. She opened the Office of Missing Soldiers that reconnected more than 20,000 soldiers with their families while also identifying thousands of unmarked graves. In speeches after the war, she often described herself as the “soldier’s friend” – a modest reference to her incredible accomplishments and one that seemed appropriate based on the thousands of cheering veterans who turned out to hear her at her many post-war speeches.<sup>5</sup>

Tired and broken down from the stress she endured on the battlefields and the war’s aftermath, Barton left for Europe in 1869 to regain her health. She found there a continent no less troubled by war and hardship than the one she left. While visiting Switzerland, she volunteered with a relief organization established in Geneva in 1864—the International Red Cross. Before long, she was delivering 40,000 garments and other supplies to the desperate citizens of Paris who were besieged by German forces at the time. Seeing the positive effects of such an organization, she returned to the United States determined to create an American Red Cross. Two prominent politicians had previously failed in their attempt to do so, and one of those individuals wrote to Barton saying, “I advise you to give it up as hopeless.”<sup>6</sup> In his view, the obstacles were too large.

However, by May 21, 1881, Barton’s hard work and determination paid off with the formation of the American Red Cross, whose mission was to protect the war-wounded and civilians in conflict zones. A key to her success was the support of President James Garfield, with whom Barton had forged a close friendship under a rain of bullets and mortars on a battlefield some 20 years earlier. She hoped that Garfield would consent to being the first President of the American Red Cross, but like everyone else, he knew there was only one person for that position. For the next 23 years, Clara Barton would tirelessly work as President of the American Red Cross, at times personally tending to the wounded and needy in military campaigns and natural disasters. She was soon known as “America’s Greatest Heroine.” Clara Barton passed away in 1912 after a lifetime of public



Barton’s Bible

service. It was said that as her coffin made the solemn journey from Washington to her home in Massachusetts, men would weep at the sight of her coffin as they recalled how Clara Barton had nursed them back to health on a battlefield 50 years before. Her life and legacy became a subject of fascination for the American public. How could a shy, timid girl become this courageous figure on battlefields far and near? When asked, Barton explained quite simply that her entire life was grounded on one little sentence taken from the Biblical book of Matthew: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”<sup>7</sup>

Barton’s cousin, William, described a complicated woman who was modest yet confident, gentle yet inflexible, kind yet stern. He claimed it was her faith in God that allowed her to see life sanely despite the terrible things she had witnessed in her life.<sup>8</sup> One contemporary newspaper called her “the most perfect incarnation of mercy the modern world has known” and observed that “the earth . . . has enough sects and creeds to serve it until the conclusion of things. But the Earth never can have enough women like Clara Barton, the embodiment of one vital principle of all religion—love for humanity.”<sup>9</sup>

---

## Key Question

1. One of Clara Barton’s greatest gifts to her fellow man was the creation of the American Red Cross (ARC). Using the 2023 Annual Report (found at [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)), research and record information on the ARC, including its Mission, Vision, and Fundamental Principles. Then, list 5-10 facts about its work in 2023.

---

## Sources

- 1 Percy H. Epler, *The Life of Clara Barton* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1915), vii.
- 2 Ishbel Ross, *Angel of the Battlefield: The Life of Clara Barton* (New York: Harper, 1956), 11.
- 3 Stephen Oates, *A Woman of Valor: Clara Barton and the Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 375.
- 4 Epler, *The Life of Clara Barton*, 226.
- 5 Ross, *The Angel of the Battlefield*, 13.
- 6 Ross, *The Angel of the Battlefield*, 31.
- 7 Epler, *The Life of Clara Barton*, 410.
- 8 Epler, *The Life of Clara Barton*, xii-xiii.
- 9 Epler, *The Life of Clara Barton*, 411.