

The Angel of the Battlefield

Clara **Barton**



Imagine this: The Civil War has begun and you are very disturbed by all the wounded soldiers returning from the battlefields. You want to help, so you begin collecting donations of food, bandages, medicine, and clothing for the soldiers, and you want to deliver them yourself where they are most needed: on the battlefield. The War Department is shocked. Women can't be allowed on the battlefields!

"I may sometimes be willing to teach for nothing, but if paid at all, I shall never do a man's work for less than a man's pay."

—Clara Barton
(1821–1912)

Your name is Clarissa Harlowe Barton, and you are a teacher, nurse, and humanitarian. At great risk to yourself, you work tirelessly on the battlefield during the Civil War helping the wounded soldiers, and you insist on treating the Confederate soldiers as well as the Union soldiers. You even-



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tually establish the American Red Cross and are named its first president.

Clarissa was born on Christmas Day 1821 in North Oxford, Massachusetts, the youngest of five children. Since her name seemed too fancy for everyday, she was called Clara. She was much younger than her brothers and sisters, and they doted on her—teaching her reading, writing, math, horseback riding, and carpentry.

Instead of being given toys or dolls, Clara was taught how to cook, sew, and run a house. Although she was a serious student, she preferred outdoor activities to the indoor pastimes “suitable” for young ladies at that time.

She was very bright but also extremely shy, and in an effort to cure her shyness, her parents sent her to boarding school. Lonely and homesick, she lost her appetite and stopped eating, so her family gave up and brought her home.

When she was eleven, her brother David fell from a roof while helping to build a barn. He was seriously injured, and for the next two years she nursed him back to health. Even back then she believed that if somebody were suffering, she must do something about it.

When she was sixteen, phrenologist Lorenzo Fowler advised her to become a teacher to cure her shyness, and for ten years she taught school in a small Massachusetts town.

At age eighteen, she took over a one-room schoolhouse where some of the older boys were bullies and had made their previous teacher’s life miserable.

On the first day of school, Clara asked to join their games at recess. When they saw how fast she ran and how well she threw a ball, those boys or any of the other students gave her no problems after that.

She gained a reputation for being able to handle difficult

children, and she spent ten years visiting troubled schools and helping to resolve their problems.

While visiting Bordentown, New Jersey, she found that there were no free schools as there were in Massachusetts. If parents couldn't afford the tuition, their children couldn't go to school, so Clara offered to teach without pay if she were given a school. The very next day the school committee gave her a run-down, old building for her school. The first day of classes, only six students showed up, but after two years, the school had six hundred students and was housed in a brand new building.

The committee then decided that the school shouldn't be run by a woman and it hired a male principal. Clara was so angry that she left the school and the teaching profession. She moved to Washington, DC, where she became the first woman to work at the Patent Office and earn the same salary as the male clerks.

After Abraham Lincoln was elected president and the Civil War began, she became very disturbed by all the wounded soldiers returning from the battlefields, so she placed an ad in the newspaper asking for donations of food, bandages, medicine, and clothing. It wasn't long before she had more materials than she could store, and she wanted to deliver the supplies where they were most needed—on the battlefield.

The War Department was shocked. Women couldn't visit the battlefield! But she continued to ask until finally, in July 1862, she obtained permission to travel behind the lines, eventually reaching some of the grimmest battlefields of the war. She was given a pass for herself and three volunteers, and she was also given carts and teams of mules for carrying the supplies.

At the front, as bullets whizzed overhead and artillery boomed in the distance, she worked nonstop—cradling the

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heads of suffering Union soldiers, serving soup from laundry tubs, ladling out gallons of hot coffee, and overseeing the baking of hundreds of loaves of bread.

Since she knew many of the wounded men might not survive the long trip to a hospital, she began treating them right there on the battlefield, which was a radical new idea at the time.

She tended the sick in nursing stations set up in tents and wagons. She also insisted on treating Confederate soldiers from the enemy's army which shocked the War Department. The men called Clara the Angel of the Battlefield.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, she became a popular and widely respected lecturer. Also, she used her own money to set up an organization to trace missing soldiers and to identify the bodies of the dead.

In November 1867 she met Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton and found herself in complete sympathy with their struggle to win equal rights for women.

She wrote articles for Lucy Stone's *Woman's Journal* and occasionally appeared on the platform with Stanton, Anthony, Stone, and Julia Ward Howe at women's suffrage conventions. When she was unable to attend women's rights conventions, she often sent letters of support which were read to the audience.

Weakened by all her hard work, she left for Switzerland in 1869 to rest and regain her health.

In Geneva she learned about the Red Cross, an organization that helped the sick and wounded during wartime without respect to nationality.

Inspired by what she had learned about the Red Cross in Europe, she stressed a peacetime mission for the Red Cross: helping victims of floods, fires, earthquakes, droughts, hurricanes, and epidemics.

In 1881 at age sixty, Clara Barton helped to establish the American Red Cross and was named its first president.

In her sixties, she was still working as hard as ever. She spent five months living and working in a tent in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, after a terrible flood had ravaged the city.

And during the Spanish-American War, at age seventy-seven, she rode onto the battlefield in a wagon to feed and nurse the sick and set up orphanages for Cuban children whose parents had disappeared or been killed.

She continued to do relief work in the field well into her seventies, but she was not a strong administrator, and political feuding at the American Red Cross forced her to resign as president in 1904 when she was in her eighties.

When she died at the age of ninety-one, her body was taken from Glen Echo, Maryland, where she had been living, back to North Oxford, Massachusetts, for burial.

The carriage driver responsible for her casket told how Clara Barton had saved his father, a Confederate soldier, whom she had found bleeding to death on the battlefield. Now it was his turn to repay the kindness.²⁰

Clara Barton is one of the most honored women in American history for being a true pioneer as well as an outstanding humanitarian. She began teaching school at a time when most teachers were men, and she risked her life when she was nearly forty years old to bring supplies and support to soldiers on the battlefields during the Civil War.

The Civil War was probably the primary defining event of her life as she discovered a real purpose for her life in nursing and in providing the relief of suffering.

Clara Barton has a well-earned place in American history as the Angel of the Civil War Battlefields and the founder of the American Red Cross.

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Her intense devotion to helping others was her top priority all her life. Teacher, nurse, and humanitarian—the mission of her life can best be summed up in her own words, “You must never so much as think whether you like it or not, whether it is bearable or not; you must never think of anything except the need, and how to meet it.”²¹