Clara Barton

National Historic Site
Maryland

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Clara Barton at her desk in the house at Glen Echo.

The Struggle Within. Clara Barton, humanitarian and founder of the American Red Cross, lived here the last 15 years of her life. Here you can examine Clara Barton the human being, a quite different person than her public image. The contrast with the public personality will give you a well-rounded picture of the whole person.

The value of her accomplishments and the position she secured in American history are unassailable. Yet, like many 19th-century women who moved beyond their traditional female roles she was plagued by self-doubts. She was fearful of delegating authority, lest the job not be done as well as she believed she could do it. Driven so, she was often in poor health.

She was exceedingly loyal to her friends and possessed a ready wit and a good sense of humor. One young woman described an experience with Barton that was probably typical. "It never occurred to me that a really famous person would tell a joke and I recall the idea of Miss Barton having a sense of humor was a bit of a shock."

Little in her early life was indicative of what was to come. Her father, a veteran of the post-Revolution Indian Wars, instilled a sense of duty. The liberal atmosphere of New England of the 1830s also had an impact. And her training at the Clinton Liberal Institute in New York State reinforced many of her own views on social service. Still, the shy, timid, private woman battled the strong-willed humanitarian part of her personality. It was a battle that she would never resolve.

The Civil War Years. Clara Barton's decision to aid Civil War soldiers was part of a growing world-wide awareness of the need for battlefield relief. In 1859, a young Swiss banker, Jean-Henri Dunant, found himself on the battlefield of Solferino, in northern Italy. Dunant was so shocked by the number of men dying, often for want of the simplest care, that he wrote a book, *Un Souvenir de Solferino,* to call attention to the matter. In 1864, a convention was held in Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss Dunant's proposal for an organization aimed at relieving suffering soldiers. The result was a treaty establishing the International Red Cross.

Americans, ignorant of Dunant's work and the resulting treaty, had formed their own charitable organizations during the Civil War. Clara Barton worked alongside the U.S. Sanitary Commission and U.S. Christian Commission. But she never allied herself too closely with these groups, for her need for independence and individual recognition led her to work alone, unhampered by organizations and interference.

Speaking Out. After the Civil War. Clara Barton maintained the rapid pace that had become her way of life. She continued her charitable activities, which included establishing an office to locate "missing" soldiers and seeing to it that the prison yard at Andersonville, Ga., was made a national cemetery. She also began to speak out and express her opinions and convictions. She promoted the enfranchisement of the former slaves and became a staunch supporter of the growing feminist movement. And her fame lent prestige to her efforts. These activities filled a distinct need in Barton. "You have never known me without work," she once wrote, "and you never will."

Chronology

December 25, 1821
Born in North Oxford, Mass.

1824-50
Attends and teaches school

1852
Starts one of the first free schools in New Jersey at Bordentown

1855-60
Patent Office clerk

Library of Congress

Clara Barton at 29

1861-65
Aids Civil War wounded at 2d Manassas, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Wilderness, Spotsylvania

"Men have worshipped war till it has cost a million times more than the whole earth is worth. . . . Deck it as you will, war is Hell. . . . Only the desire to soften some of its hardships and allay some of its miseries ever induced me . . . to face its pestilent and unholy breath."

1865-69
Searches for men of U.S. Army listed as missing

"I believe I must have been born believing in the full right of women to all privileges and positions which nature and justice accord her common with other human beings. Perfectly equal rights—human rights. There was never any question in my mind in regard to this."

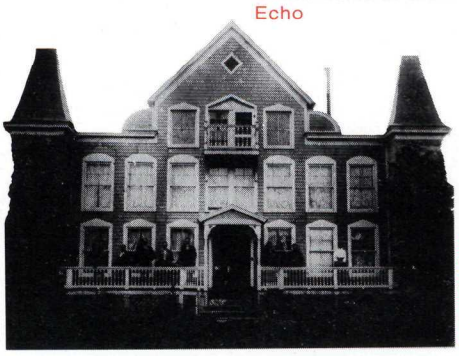
1870-71
Works with the International Red Cross

1876-82
Lobbies Government for adoption of Treaty of Geneva

May 21, 1881
Becomes president of American Red Cross; assists in relief of 18 disasters including floods, hurricanes, and cyclones.

March 16, 1882
American Red Cross established formally by President Chester A. Arthur

1891
Builds home at Glen Echo



American Red Cross

The house at Glen Echo

1898
Works on Cuban battlefields during Spanish-American War

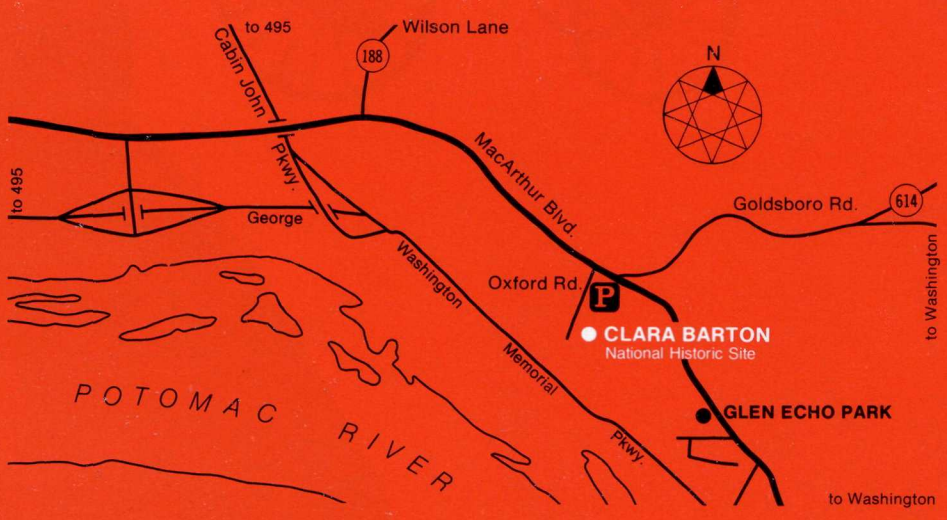
1904
Resigns as president of American Red Cross

1905
Establishes National First Aid Association of America

"Others are writing my biography, and let it rest as they elect to make it. I have lived my life, well and ill, always less well than I wanted it to be, but it is, as it is, and as it has been. . . ."

April 12, 1912
Dies at Glen Echo, Md.

Clara Barton National Historic Site. Clara Barton's house is located in Glen Echo, Md., just north of the District of Columbia. Visitors to the house may use the parking lot between the house and Glen Echo Park, both of which are administered by the National Park Service. The house is usually open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The house is closed January 1, Thanksgiving, December 25, and occasionally on other federal holidays. You may wish to check with the staff before making a visit. Either call 301-492-6245, or write to 5801 Oxford Road, Glen Echo, MD 20812 for information on hours, tours, and programs.



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"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." Clara Barton, 1866

Learning About the Red Cross. In 1868, Barton suffered a nervous breakdown. She traveled to Europe for rest, and there heard, for the first time, of the Red Cross. During the Franco-Prussian War, she labored to help the war-stricken civilians of France and Germany. She was so impressed with the Red Cross that she became determined to carry its ideals to the United States.

It was a difficult job. Ten years of poor health, uncooperative government officials, and public apathy discouraged her. However, she persevered, and in 1882 the U.S. Senate, ratified the Treaty of Geneva, thus establishing the Red Cross in the United States.

Last Years at the Red Cross. At the age of 77, Clara Barton again went to war. During the Spanish-American War of 1898, she directed relief from the battlefields of Cuba. Though the Red Cross aid was timely and competent, the war pointed up the inability of the small organization to meet the needs of the modern nation. Alarmed, several Red Cross members began to pressure for Barton's resignation. They considered Barton too old, disorganized, and unbusinesslike to deal with the expanding Red Cross and sought the help of leading figures in government to pressure her to resign. But their approach was harsh and left their founder bitter and alone. Barton was particularly appalled that even President Theodore Roosevelt had turned against her. "The government I thought I loved, and loyally tried to serve," she wrote after her resignation in 1904, "has shut every door in my face."

Retirement. Clara Barton continued to be active after leaving the Red Cross. She kept up her voluminous correspondence and her interest in the feminist movement. In 1905, she established the National First Aid Association of America to bring about a knowledge of emergency preparedness on the community level. She also indulged in reading, gardening, and writing—all favorite pastimes—and she enjoyed the antics of *Tommy the cat* and *Baba her horse*. She remained in good health until her death in 1912 at Glen Echo.

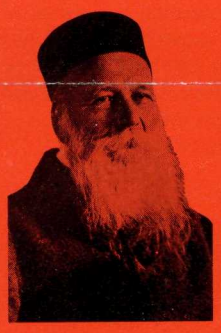
From her bedroom in the back, Barton had a fine view of the Potomac Valley. Flower and vegetable gardens, and the household cows, chickens, and horses gave the place a peaceful, countrified air. "She loved her Glen Echo home," a friend recalled, "and used to say the moon seemed always to be shining there."

The House. Saved through the efforts of The Friends of Clara Barton, the house reflects Clara Barton's resourcefulness. She first used the house as a Red Cross warehouse and then modified it for living quarters and offices in 1897.

As you tour the house, try to imagine what it was like when Barton lived here. The hallway was adorned with gifts from grateful foreign governments, and rooms overflowed with framed resolutions of gratitude, photographs of her relief work, and protraits. The numerous "hidden" closets held Red Cross supplies. The bustle of secretaries, doctors, and legislators gave the house an earnest and productive atmosphere.

We hope that you enjoy your visit as much as Clara Barton enjoyed living here.

Clara Barton and the American Red Cross

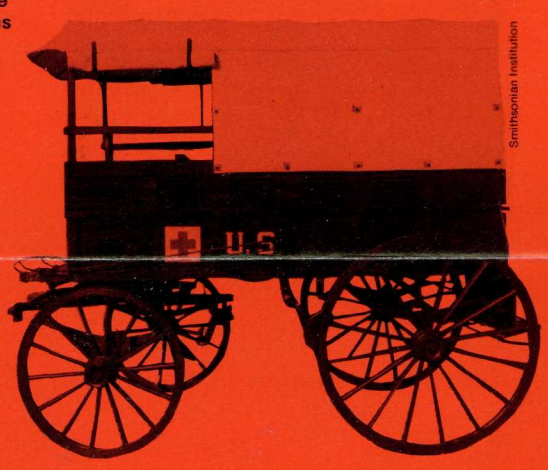


"The moral sense of the importance of human life; the human desire to lighten a little the torments of all these poor wretches, or restore their shattered courage; . . . all these combine to create a kind of energy which gives one a positive craving to relieve as many as one can."

Jean-Henri Dunant
Un Souvenir de Solferino

Clara Barton ran the American Red Cross with the same highly personal style she had used during the Civil War. As president, from 1882 to 1904, she directed relief, garnered supplies, attempted to expand the organization, and even cleaned warehouses. Joel Chandler Harris, reporting the hurricane off the Georgia Sea Islands in 1893-94, described her organization as "entirely different from any other relief organization that has come under my observation. Its strongest and most admirable feature is its extreme simplicity."

Barton's greatest contribution and innovation was to actively engage the Red Cross in peacetime aid such as the Johnstown Flood of 1889. This was an idea adapted from her work with civilians during the Franco-Prussian War. In 1884, the International Red Cross officially recognized peacetime work in its "American Amendment" to the Geneva Treaty.



Smithsonian Institution

This is the only surviving ambulance of those that the American Red Cross procured for use during the Spanish-American War. It is today in the Smithsonian Institution.

Mathew Brady took this photograph of Clara Barton in 1863 as she was becoming a nationally known figure for her Civil War relief work.

Library of Congress