

Maven of Mercy

Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, set the standard for selflessness

> Clara Barton is most widely known as the founder of the American Red Cross, the “Angel of the Battlefield” and the namesake of a busy service area on the southbound New Jersey Turnpike.

She was much more than that.

Barton was a pioneer at a time when women were expected to stay home and care for their families, an era when women were barred from working in many jobs and unable to vote. Barton worked as a teacher and patent clerk, a searcher of missing persons, nurse and humanitarian, tirelessly serving those around the world who needed help most.

“You must never so much as think whether you like it or not, whether it is bearable or not,” she said once. “You must never think of anything except the need and how to meet it.”

Clarissa “Clara” Harlowe Barton was born in North Oxford, Mass., on Dec. 25, 1821, to Captain Stephen and Sarah Barton. The youngest of five, she and her siblings were educated from the time they were small by their father, a veteran of the Indian Wars, about how important it was to serve one’s country and help others.

She first showed her devotion to



service through nursing when she was 11 and her brother David fell off the barn roof he was repairing. Doctors told the family that David would surely die of his serious internal injuries within a year. Barton stepped in and took care of her brother day and night for two years. He recovered.

In 1839 she became a teacher. When Barton was offered a “promotion” to teach in a more challenging school at the same \$2 weekly salary (about \$50

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today)—less than what male teachers in the same job were earning—she told the school board, “I may sometimes be willing to teach for nothing, but if paid at all, I will never do a man’s work for less than a man’s pay.” The school board agreed and decided to pay her the same salary as the male teachers.

Barton’s strong spirit served her well when, in 1854, she took a job as a copyist in the U.S. Patent Office in Washington, D.C., and became a civil servant. She was the first woman to get a substantial clerkship in the federal government, and she loved her job. However once the Civil War began, she resigned in order to volunteer in aiding soldiers on the front lines of battle.

Women had never been allowed on battlefields or in military hospitals or camps before, and officials declined her help at first. Barton prevailed and won the access and support she sought. “I

may be compelled to face danger, but never fear it, and while our soldiers can stand and fight, I can stand and feed and nurse them,” she said. “My place is anywhere between the bullet and the hospital.” Her courage and dedication as the “Angel of the Battlefield” won her much praise and attention, and she was named the superintendent of Union nurses.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, Barton still felt called to serve. “War, although the most tragic, is not the only evil that assails humanity,” she said. At her urging, President Abraham Lincoln granted her permission to search for missing soldiers through a letter writing campaign via the Office of Correspondence.

Barton’s schedule was relentless and taxing and took a toll on her health. A trip to Europe for rest in 1869 introduced her to the International

Red Cross. She started the American Association of the Red Cross in 1881, at age 60, expanding the concept of the organization to include assisting in the face of national disasters.

Barton was president of the American Red Cross for 23 years, leading the organization as it assisted victims of such disasters as the Texas famine in 1886, the Florida yellow fever epidemic in 1887 and the Galveston flood in 1900, as well as those injured in the Spanish American War.

She resigned as head of the Red Cross in 1904 and died in 1912 at the age of 90 at her home in Glen Echo, Md. An obituary of Barton published in the *Detroit Free Press* stated simply, “She was the most perfect incarnation of mercy the modern world has known.”

Today, Barton’s legacy lives on through the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org). ■

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