

Clara Barton

1821–1912



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Clara Barton was the founder of the American Red Cross, and earned the reputation as “Angel of the Battlefield” for her work during the Civil War.



As you read the biography below, think about how Clara Barton’s compassion led her to do all that she did during the Civil War.

Clara Barton was born in Massachusetts. Her first job was as a teacher, a career that she remained at for 15 years. She then worked briefly as a clerk at the U.S. Patent Office and is thought to be the agency’s first female employee.

As the Civil War began, Barton became more interested in **humanitarian** efforts. She entered the health care field and began nursing wounded soldiers on the battlefields. Barton set up a service to carry supplies and food for the wounded soldiers. For this, Barton earned the reputation as the “Angel of the Battlefield.”

Barton’s work, however, was difficult and taxing. She frequently had to move to new locations with short notice, and worked very hard at each new post. She believed that the U.S. War Department had to be organized differently to be truly helpful for the soldiers in need, and worked hard to restructure the government **bureaucracy**.

After the Civil War, Barton was exhausted and went to Switzerland to rest. In 1869 Barton encountered the International Committee of the Red Cross, which was based in Geneva. Barton volunteered with the Red Cross during the Franco-Prussian War in Europe 1870. Barton admired the Red Cross’s



VOCABULARY

humanitarian a person who promotes human welfare

bureaucracy non-elected government offices

work and was inspired to establish a similar organization in the United States.

Barton established the American Association of the Red Cross in 1881 and became its first president. The following year, Barton lobbied the U.S. Senate to ratify the Geneva Convention, an international treaty that outlines the treatment of soldiers and prisoners during war.

When a flood devastated Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1889, Barton realized the Red Cross could help civilians as well as soldiers. Barton and the Red Cross led relief efforts following the flood, and later aided victims of a hurricane that struck Georgia and South Carolina.

Barton headed the American Red Cross until her retirement in 1904. She spent the rest of her life lecturing on various topics and writing books.

Barton died in 1912. Her house in Glen Echo, Maryland, which was once the headquarters for the American Red Cross, now stands as the Clara Barton National Historic Site.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why do you think Clara Barton earned the reputation as “Angel of the Battlefield?”

2. **Analyze** Do you think you would be able to do the kind of work Barton did? Explain your answer, and give one fact you learned from your reading.

ACTIVITY

3. Use a phone book or local reference to locate a Red Cross chapter in your area. Make a flyer for this branch to put up at your school. Include the information you learn about this Red Cross group (directions, phone number, etc) on your flyer.