

## Clara Barton, 1821-1912: A Life of Caring for Others

She started the American Red Cross. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*  
26 July 2009

VOICE ONE:

I'm Ray Freeman.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Shirley Griffith with the Special English program, People in America. Every week we tell about a person who was important in the history of the United States. Today we tell about a woman who spent her life caring for others, Clara Barton.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Clara Barton was a small woman. Yet she made a big difference in many lives. Today her work continues to be important to thousands of people in trouble.

Clara Barton was an unusual woman for her time. She was born on Christmas day, December twenty-fifth, eighteen twenty-one. In those days, most women were expected to marry, have children and stay home to take care of them. Barton, however, became deeply involved in the world.

By the time of her death in nineteen twelve, she had begun a revolution that led to the right of women to do responsible work for society. As a nurse, she cared for thousands of Wounded soldiers. She began the American Red Cross. And, she successfully urged the American government to accept the Geneva Convention. That treaty established standards for conditions for soldiers injured or captured during wartime.

VOICE TWO:



Clara Barton

Clara Barton really began her life of caring for the sick when she was only eleven years old. She lived with her family on a farm in the northeastern state of Massachusetts. One of her brothers, David, was seriously injured while helping build a barn. For two years, Clara Barton took care of David until he was healed.

Most eleven-year-old girls would have found the job impossible. But Clara felt a great need to help. And she was very good at it. She also seemed to feel most safe when she was at home with her mother and father, or riding a horse on her family's land.

As a young child, Clara had great difficulty studying and making friends at school. Her four brothers and sisters were much older than she. Several of them were teachers. For most of Clara's early years, she was taught at home. She finished school at age fifteen. Then she went to work in her brother David's clothing factory. The factory soon burned, leaving her without a job.

VOICE ONE:

Clara Barton decided to teach school. In eighteen thirty-six, she passed the teacher's test and began teaching near her home in North Oxford, Massachusetts. She became an extremely popular and respected teacher.

After sixteen years of teaching, she realized she did not know all she wanted to know. She wanted more education. Very few universities accepted women in those days. So Clara went to a special school for girls in Massachusetts. While in that school, she became interested in public education.

VOICE TWO:

After she graduated, a friend suggested she try to establish the first public school in the state of New Jersey. Officials there seemed to think that education was only for children whose parents had enough money to pay for private schools.

The officials did not want Barton to start a school for poor people. But she offered to teach without pay for three months. She told the officials that they could decide after that if she had been successful. They gave her an old building with poor equipment. And they gave her six very active little boys to teach.

At the end of five weeks, the school was too small for the number of children who wanted to attend. By the end of the year, the town built her a bigger, better school. They had to give her more space. She then had six hundred students in the school.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Within a year, Clara Barton had lost her voice. She had to give up teaching. She moved to Washington, D.C. to begin a new job writing documents for the United States government.

Clara Barton started her life as a nurse during the early days of the Civil War in eighteen sixty-one. One day, she went to the train center in Washington to meet a group of soldiers from Massachusetts. Many of them had been her friends. She began taking care of their wounds.

Not long after, she left her office job. She became a full-time nurse for the wounded on their way from the fields of battle to the hospital.

Soon, Barton recognized that many more lives could be saved if the men had medical help immediately after they were hurt. Army rules would not permit anyone except male soldiers to be on the battlefield. But Barton took her plans for helping the wounded to a high army official. He approved her plans.

VOICE TWO:

Barton and a few other women worked in the battle areas around Washington. She heard about the second fierce battle at Bull Run in the nearby state of Virginia. She got into a railroad car and traveled there.

Bull Run must have been a fearful sight. Northern forces were losing a major battle there. Everywhere Barton looked lay wounded and dying men.

Day and night she worked to help the suffering. When the last soldier had been placed on a train, Barton finally left. She was just in time to escape the southern army. She escaped by riding a horse, a skill she gained as a young girl.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

For four years, Clara Barton was at the front lines of the bloodiest battles in the war between the North and the South. She was there at Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Charleston. She was there at Spotsylvania, Petersburg, and Richmond. She cleaned the wounds of badly injured soldiers. She eased the pain of the dying. And she fed those who survived.

When she returned to Washington, Clara Barton found she was a hero. She had proved that women could work in terrible conditions. She made people understand that women could provide good medical care. She also showed that nursing was an honorable



**This photo of Clara Barton -- taken around 1865 by Mathew Brady -- is the most famous and widely circulated image of the founder of the American Red Cross.**

profession.

After the war ended, Barton's doctor sent her to Europe to rest. Instead of resting, she met with representatives of the International Red Cross. The organization had been established in eighteen sixty-three to offer better treatment for people wounded or captured during wars. She was told that the United States was the only major nation that refused to join.

VOICE TWO:



**Clara Barton monument at Antietam**

Barton began planning a campaign to create an American Red Cross. Before she could go home, though, the war between France and Prussia began in eighteen seventy.

Again, Clara Barton went to the fields of battle to nurse the wounded. After a while her eyes became infected. The woman of action was ordered to remain quiet for months in a dark room, or become blind.

When she returned to the United States she again suffered a serious sickness. She used the time in a hospital to write letters in support of an American

Red Cross organization.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

In eighteen eighty-one, Barton's campaign proved successful. The United States Congress signed the World's Treaty of the International Red Cross. This established the American Chapter of the Red Cross. Clara Barton had reached one of her major goals in life.

The next year she successfully urged Congress to accept the Geneva Convention. This treaty set the international rules for treatment of soldiers wounded or captured in war.

For twenty-five years, Clara Barton continued as the president of the American Red Cross. Under her guidance, the organization helped people in all kinds of trouble. She directed the aid efforts for victims of floods in Johnstown, Pennsylvania and Galveston, Texas. She led Red Cross workers in Florida during an outbreak of the disease yellow fever. And she helped during periods when people were starving in Russia and Armenia.

VOICE TWO:

Clara Barton retired when she was in her middle eighties. For her last home, she chose a huge old building near Washington, D.C. The building had been used for keeping Red Cross equipment and then as her office. It was made with material saved from aid centers built after the flood in Johnstown.

In that house on the Potomac River, Clara Barton lived her remaining days. She died after a life of service to others in April, nineteen twelve, at age ninety.

She often said: "You must never so much as think if you like it or not, if it is bearable or not. You must never think of anything except the need --- and how to meet it."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

This Special English program was written by Jeri Watson. I'm Ray Freeman.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Shirley Griffith. Join us again next week for another People in America program on the Voice of America.