

CLARA BARTON — ANGEL OF THE BATTLEFIELD AND FOUNDER OF THE AMERICAN RED CROSS

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Figure 1. Clara Barton, as photographed by Civil War photographer Matthew Brady, 1863.

Clara Barton — The Early Years

Clarissa Harlowe Barton (1821–1912) is one of the most honored women in American history. Known as Clara, she is internationally hailed as an American Civil War nurse and for founding the American Red Cross in 1881, which she led for the next 23 years (Figure 1).

Clara Barton was born in 1821 on Christmas Day near Oxford, Massachusetts. She initially began work as a teacher and established the first free public school in Bordentown, New Jersey. The school was a huge success, so much so that the town leaders adhered to the prejudice of the day and hired a male principal to run the school. Barton, who had established the school and brought it to success, was furious: “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.”

In 1854, Barton moved to Washington, D.C., where she worked as a clerk in the U.S. Patent Office from 1854–1857, the first woman to receive a substantial clerkship in the federal government. Her \$1,400 salary was equal work for equal pay; she made the same as the male clerks.

Robert McClelland, Secretary of the Interior, did not like women working in government offices. He reduced Barton to a copyist with a pay rate of ten cents for every hundred words. Her position was abolished in 1856. She returned to Massachusetts, where she lived for several years. When Abraham Lincoln was elected president a few years later, Barton returned to the Patent Office, but only as a copyist, never to the position of a clerk with equal salary.

Angel of the Battlefield

The Civil War began in earnest on April 12, 1861, with the shots fired at Fort Sumter in Charleston

Harbor. A week later, soldiers of the Sixth Massachusetts Infantry were attacked by Southern sympathizers during the Baltimore Riot. The injured from Baltimore were taken to nearby Washington, and Barton hurried from the Patent Office to a makeshift hospital to tend to the wounded.

During the chaos that surrounded that event, she gathered food, medicine, and other supplies from her household to distribute to the soldiers. She solicited friends to send essential goods; her requests produced an overwhelmingly positive response, which she learned how to store and distribute.

Thus, Barton began her career as a Civil War nurse and relief worker. She offered personal support to the men to keep up their spirits. She read to them, wrote letters for them, and prayed with them. At that time, nursing was a predominantly male profession. The exact number of nurses during the Civil War is hard to establish; cited figures vary greatly. Most often, it is claimed that there were approximately 3,000 female nurses who served during the war (both North and South). The title of “nurse” was rather vague. There were no “trained” nurses or credentials. A diverse group of men and women cared for wounded and dying soldiers. Men were not fond of women helping out in the hospitals, but woman proved their worth.

Barton knew that she was needed most on the battlefields. On August 3, 1862, government leaders and the army gave her permission to offer her voluntary services and take medical supplies to battlefields and field hospitals.

Legend has it that following the battle of Cedar Mountain in northern Virginia later that month, Clara Barton appeared at midnight at a field hospital with a wagonload of supplies. The surgeon on duty later wrote: "I thought that night if heaven ever sent out a[n]... angel, she must be one — her assistance was so timely." After that, she became known as the Angel of the Battlefield.

Many sources say Barton was so close to the front lines at the Battle of Sharpsburg (Antietam) that a bullet tore through her clothes and killed the wounded soldier for whom she was caring. Overworked surgeons there had resorted to fashioning makeshift bandages out of corn husks. Barton organized people to administer first aid and otherwise care for casualties.

With her supply wagons, she traveled with the Union army and helped the Union wounded, as well as the Confederate prisoners. While some supplies and transportation were provided by the army quartermaster in Washington, D.C., most were purchased with donations solicited by Barton or from her personal funds. Congress reimbursed her for her expenses after the war.

Clara Barton's Missing Soldiers Office: 1865–1868

Barton wrote to President Abraham Lincoln in February 1865, seeking permission to become an official government correspondent to search for those listed as missing during the conflict. As a result, on March 11, 1865, she established *The Office of Correspondence with Friends of the Missing Men of the United States Army*. Recognition by the War Department followed shortly after.

Once people realized she successfully found dead soldiers, she began receiving thousands of letters from soldiers' loved ones, as many as 150 a day. Do you know the whereabouts of Jeremiah? Aaron? Henry? Jacob?

Shown in Figure 2 is an envelope with the printed corner card "Clara Barton, Gen. Correspondent. Correspondence Office with Friends of Paroled Prisoners, Annapolis, Md" ("Office" is crossed out). It is addressed to "Mr. Joseph W. Butz, Frankfort Springs P.O., Beaver Co[unty] Pa." The cover is franked with a 3¢ rose (U.S. Scott 65) and tied by rosette cancel with a matching "Washington D.C. Apr. 2" circular date stamp.

The original enclosure is a printed form letter signed by Clara Barton, dated April 1, 1865, titled the same as the front of the cover. It offers the following information: "... the name of Thomas F. Campbell Co B, 4. Pa. Cav. does not appear among the lists of arrivals. Boats are landing almost daily, and any information which I may gain will be most cheerfully forwarded to you at the earliest moment."

The cover and letter are illustrated on page 107 of Earl

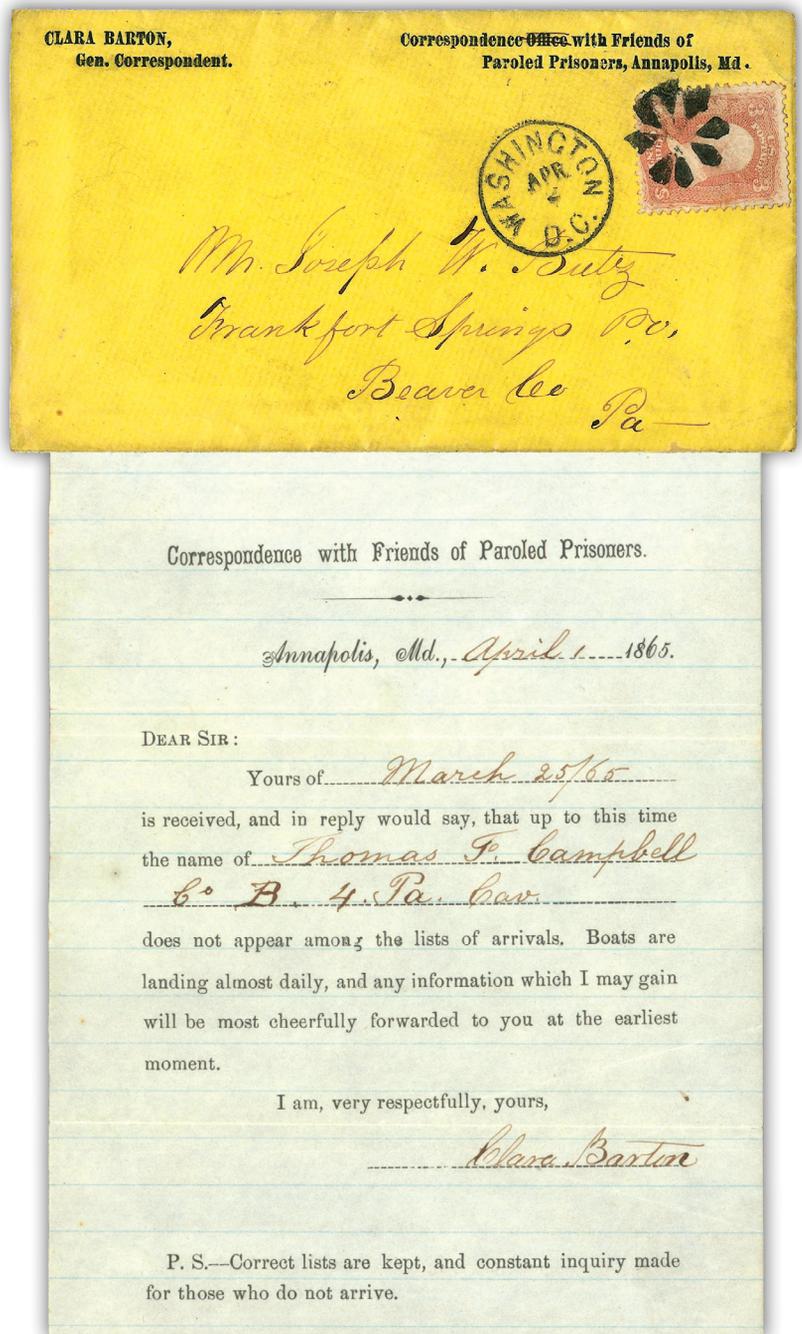


Figure 2. Corner card and original April 1, 1865, letter from Clara Barton, Correspondence Office with Friends of Paroled Prisoners, Annapolis, Maryland.

Antrim's classic book on Civil War prisons, *Civil War Prisons and Their Covers*. This coveted piece of history was in the acclaimed Civil War Special Routes Collection of Steven C. Walske and sold for \$4,750 plus buyer premium in the Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries sale of his collection on May 27, 2010.

As head of the Office of Correspondence with Friends of the Missing Men of the United States Army, Barton was the first woman to run a government bureau. She received \$15,000 in congressional appropriations and worked with hand-picked staff.

In her final report to Congress, Barton presented remarkable statistics. In four years, the Missing Soldiers

Office “had received 63,182 inquiries, written 41,855 letters, mailed 58,693 printed circulars, distributed 99,057 copies of her printed rolls, and identified 22,000 men.”

The American Red Cross

By December 1868, Barton was exhausted from years of work on behalf of soldiers. It was recommended she go to Europe to rest. Barton partially followed that advice, packing off to Europe. But, characteristically, she could not relax. She instead met with representatives from the International Red Cross, based in Geneva, Switzerland, who inspired her to launch the American Red Cross.

Barton returned from Geneva in 1873, after providing nursing and humanitarian assistance during the Franco-Prussian War. She advocated for America to ratify the Geneva Convention, which had produced a number of agreements; her particular interest on behalf of the Red Cross was the Humanitarian Law of Armed Conflicts, a group of international laws for the humane treatment of wounded or captured military personnel, medical personnel and non-military civilians during war or armed conflicts.

Barton founded the American Red Cross on May 21, 1881. She set the precedent that the Red Cross would respond to natural disasters, in addition to war. Per Barton’s pamphlet, “The Red Cross of the Geneva Convention: What the Red Cross Is,” written and published in 1878, she opens by describing the Red Cross’ mission: “A confederation of Relief Societies in different countries, acting under the Geneva Convention, carries on its work under the sign of the Red Cross. The aim of these societies is to ameliorate the condition of wounded soldiers in the armies in campaign on land or sea, and to furnish relief in cases of great national calamity.”

Illustrated (in Figure 3) is an autographed letter from Barton, signed and written at Dansville, New York, on Aug. 24, 1881, to Barton’s brother in Worcester, Massachusetts, on the letterhead of “The Red Cross of the International Convention of Geneva, Office of Clara Barton, American Representative.”

In the letter, Barton laments President Garfield’s assassination, which set back ratification of the Geneva treaty for the Red Cross:

I went to Washington the last of July, and only left for home the day the President was shot, four months of very hard work, but successful, if it were not for the uncertainty of the changes which I suppose now, must come. The present Administration is fully pledged to my work, but it may require to be done over again, but if so, there is a prospect that it may be done in this state, as N.Y. will no doubt be the cornerstone of the government after the change — a dreadful thing! I could see some purpose in the wounding, but can see none in the death of Mr. Garfield, it is all dark beyond!

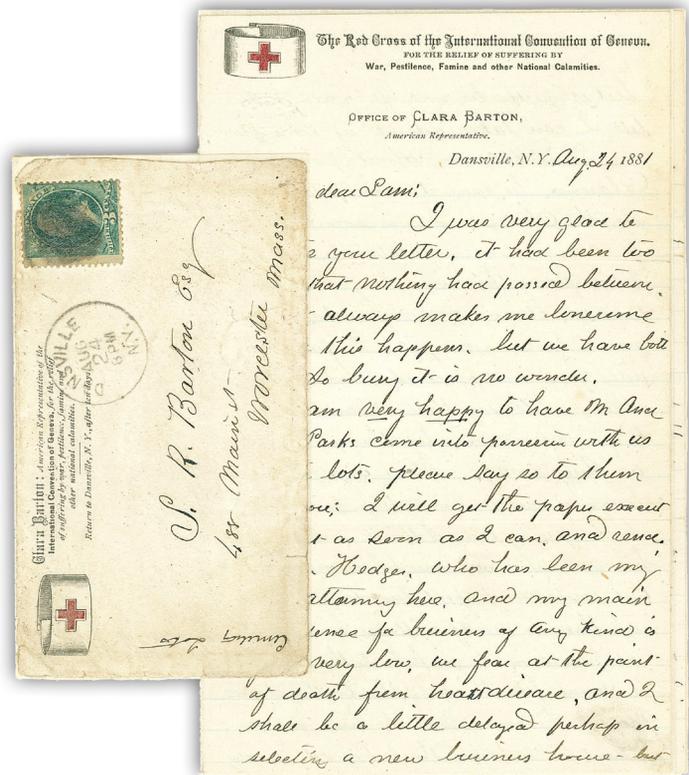


Figure 3. Letter dated August 24, 1881, from Clara Barton to her brother on letterhead of “The Red Cross of the International Convention of Geneva, for the Relief of Suffering by War, Pestilence, Famine and other National Calamities,” written shortly after the assassination of President Garfield.

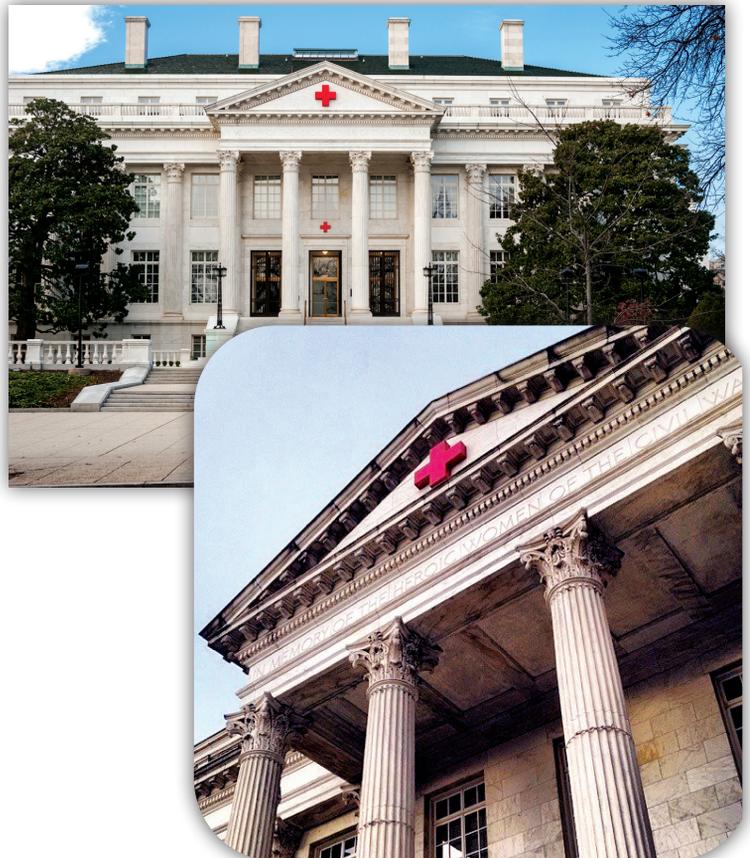


Figure 4. Inscription at the top of American Red Cross National Headquarters building honors the heroic women who served in the Civil War.

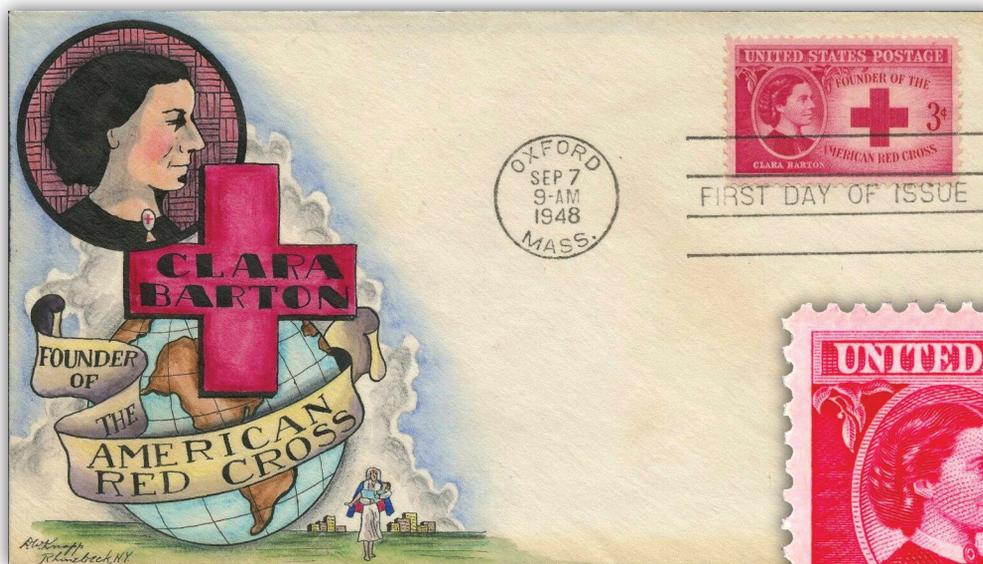


Figure 5 (above). Dorothy W. Knapp illustrated first day cover, Oxford, Massachusetts, September 7, 1948.

Figure 6 (right). Commemorative 3¢ stamp honoring Clara Barton, 1948.



The original cover front is shown (Figure 3, left) and both together were sold in another Siegel auction in 2017. It was formerly part of the inventory of the late Irwin Weinberg.

It was not until 1882 that President Chester A. Arthur signed the Geneva treaty.

The National Headquarters building of the American Red Cross in Washington, D.C., bears an inscription at the top, “*In memory of the heroic women of the Civil War.*” It was built between 1915 and 1917 and serves as a memorial to all women who served in the Civil War. It is in central Washington, not far from the White House (Figure 4).

Clara Barton’s Enormous Legacy

Clara Barton was the very definition of altruism. With her lifetime of dedication to the relief of suffering, both at home and abroad, Barton continued to serve as president of the American Red Cross until 1904 when, at the age of 82, she resigned as president. Barton then started the National First Aid Association of America. It promoted local first aid programs and later became part of the American Red Cross.

At age 90, Clara Barton died in her home in Glen Echo, Maryland, on April 12, 1912 — the anniversary of the first shots fired at Fort Sumter, which began the Civil War and her career of service to the suffering.

The Library of Congress houses the papers of Clara Barton. This treasure trove consists of 62,000 items (81,608 images), most of which are digitized. The collection contains correspondence, Barton’s diaries, journals, reports, addresses, legal and financial papers, organizational records, lectures, writings, scrapbooks, biographical material, printed matter, and memorabilia. Online, the public is invited to help transcribe the originals, a fascinating endeavor which can be done from your computer; visit crowd.loc.gov to learn more.

Numerous commemorative postage stamps have been issued in her honor around the world and First Day Covers with her visage abound. Countless schools, buildings, and more have been named for her. We celebrate the force of nature that was Clara Barton.

The American Red Cross aptly states in tribute, “Her legacy to the nation — service to humanity — is reflected in the services provided daily by the employees and volunteers of the American Red Cross,” (Figures 5 and 6).

Many Barton biographies provide not only the specific details of her life but insights to the often-outrageous things women of her day endured. The biographical material from the Clara Barton Missing Soldiers Office Museum was an essential source for this vignette.

Further Reading and Resources

- American Battlefield Trust. “Clara Barton, Relief Organizer/Humanitarian.” Accessed January 21, 2019. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/clara-barton>.
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- National Park Service. “Clara Barton Chronology 1861–1869 — Clara Barton National Historic Site Maryland” Last modified April 10, 2015. Accessed January 21, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/clba/learn/kidsyouth/chron2.htm>.