

Clara Barton: The Angel of the Battlefield

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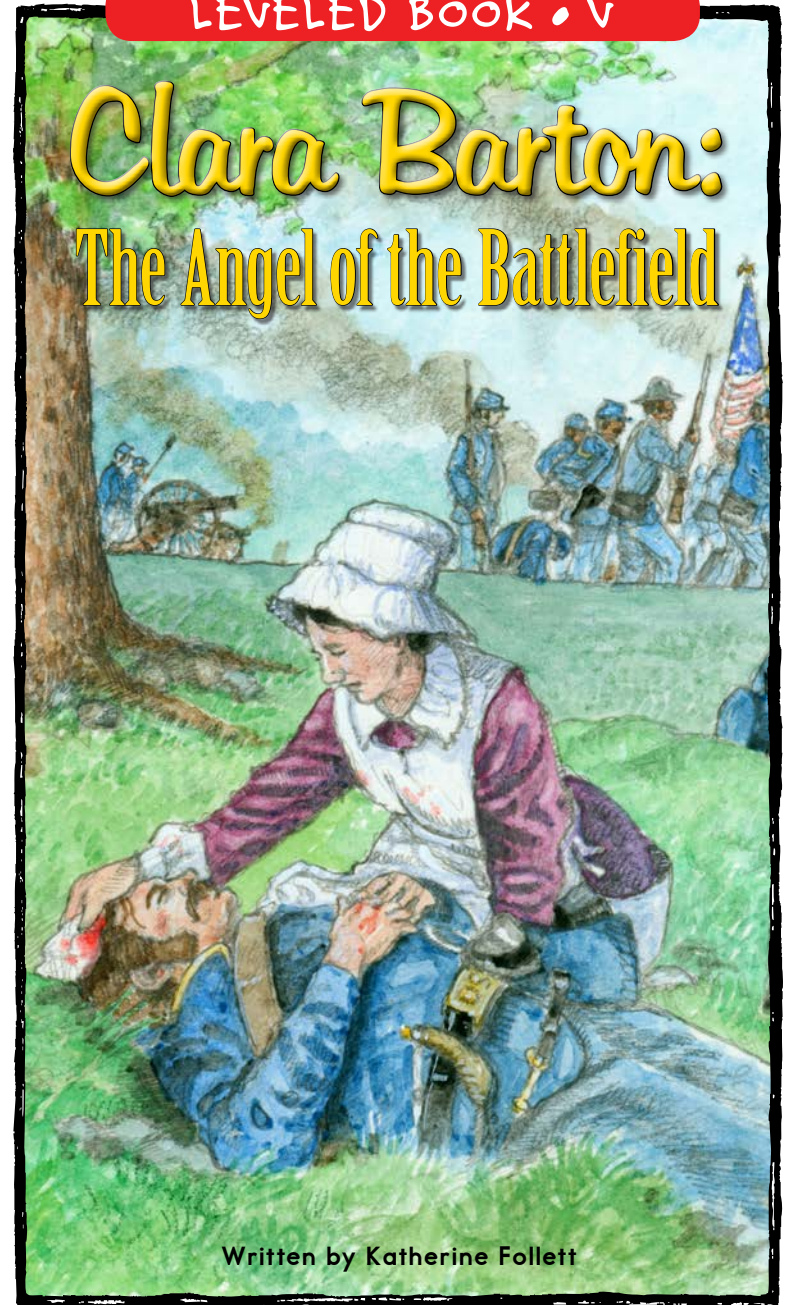


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Written by Katherine Follett

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Back cover: Clara Barton at an International Red Cross conference in St. Petersburg, Russia, in June 1902

Table of contents: Clara Barton (center) with the first graduating class of nurses at Blockley Hospital in Philadelphia.

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Correlation

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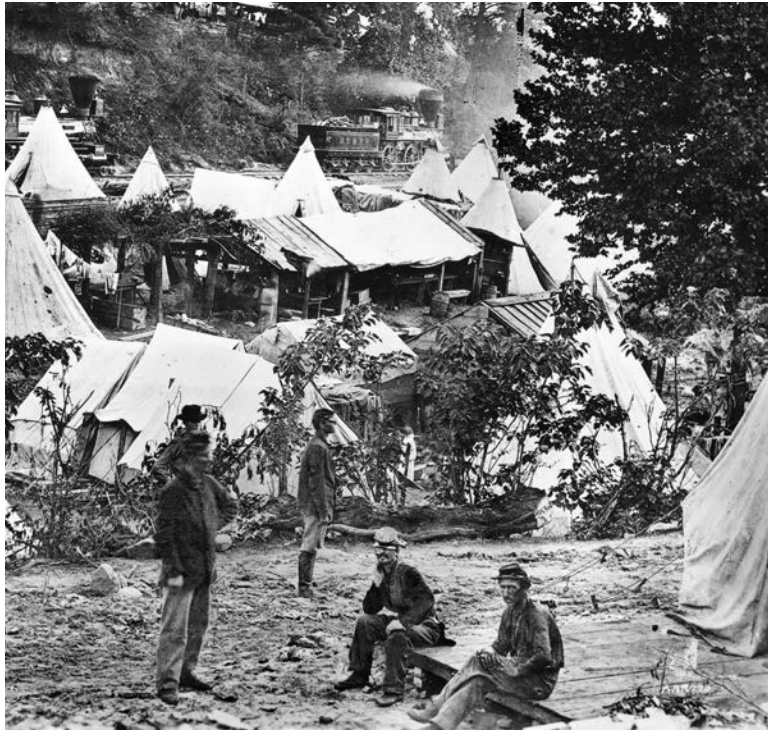


Introduction

Guns cracked and cannons boomed through the suffocating summer air of Virginia. Beneath that noise was a softer but much more terrifying sound. Wounded and dying men moaned or cried out for help. However, in the chaos of the **battlefield**, no one replied to their cries.

Through the smoke came an unbelievable sight: a small woman wearing a modest dress and carrying armloads of bandages. A Union commander stopped her before she could reach wounded soldiers.

“This is no place for a woman!” he shouted.



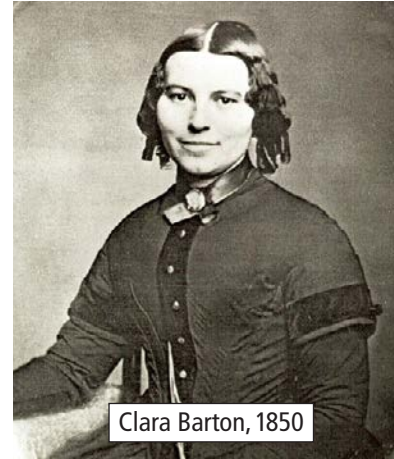
A Civil War field hospital at City Point, Virginia

The woman looked the officer right in the eye and handed him a letter. The letter—signed by Surgeon General William A. Hammond, the nation’s top doctor—**authorized** Clara Barton to visit battlefields and **tend** to sick and wounded soldiers.

As soon as he read the name *Clara Barton*, the commander’s eyes went wide, and he bowed in apology. Without a word, the woman made her way toward the injured soldiers. The Angel of the Battlefield had arrived.

Clara’s Childhood

Clara Barton was the baby of her family. When she was born on December 25, 1821, in Oxford, Massachusetts, her four siblings were already teenagers. They adored their little sister and taught her everything from reading to riding a horse. She quickly learned how to work on the family farm.



Clara’s family was wealthy and well-known in the small town of Oxford in central Massachusetts.

Clara was very smart, but she was also very shy. Her parents thought boarding school might help her come out of her shell. School was traumatic for Clara. She was so terrified of speaking in front of strangers that she became ill. Her parents quickly brought her home.

When Clara was eleven, something happened that changed her life forever. Her favorite brother, David, was helping build a barn when he fell off the roof. His injuries were very serious. For over two years, Clara stayed at his bedside until he fully recovered. She never forgot how **purposeful** caring for him felt.



Early Jobs

When Clara grew up, she knew she wanted to work. But in the 1800s, women weren't allowed to do many jobs. One of the few **careers** they could have was to teach. After starting in a one-room schoolhouse in Oxford, Massachusetts, Clara took a job in Bordentown, New Jersey.

At the time, there were no free public schools in New Jersey—only private schools that cost money to attend. Clara thought this was an injustice for poor students.

She started a free school that was open to anyone. The school quickly attracted hundreds of students. Clara hired more teachers, but the New Jersey school board didn't think a woman should run a school. They hired a man to be principal.

Clara was deeply insulted. She felt she had no choice but to leave teaching.



Clara set up an office in Washington, D.C., to help families find missing wounded soldiers (left). Patients wait for treatment at a Union Army hospital in 1864 (main).

The Civil War

Clara moved to Washington, D.C., the nation's capital, and found a job in the U.S. Patent Office. She was good at her job and was quickly promoted. Once again, there was concern about a woman holding an important government job, and she was replaced by a man.

This time, Clara didn't have time to find a new job. The country was about to be torn apart by war.

The **Civil War** erupted between the northern Union and the southern Confederacy in 1861. Washington, D.C., was right in the middle of the conflict, and wounded men poured into the city. Clara immediately decided to help.



Wounded Civil War soldiers wait for treatment in 1862 at Savage Station, Virginia.

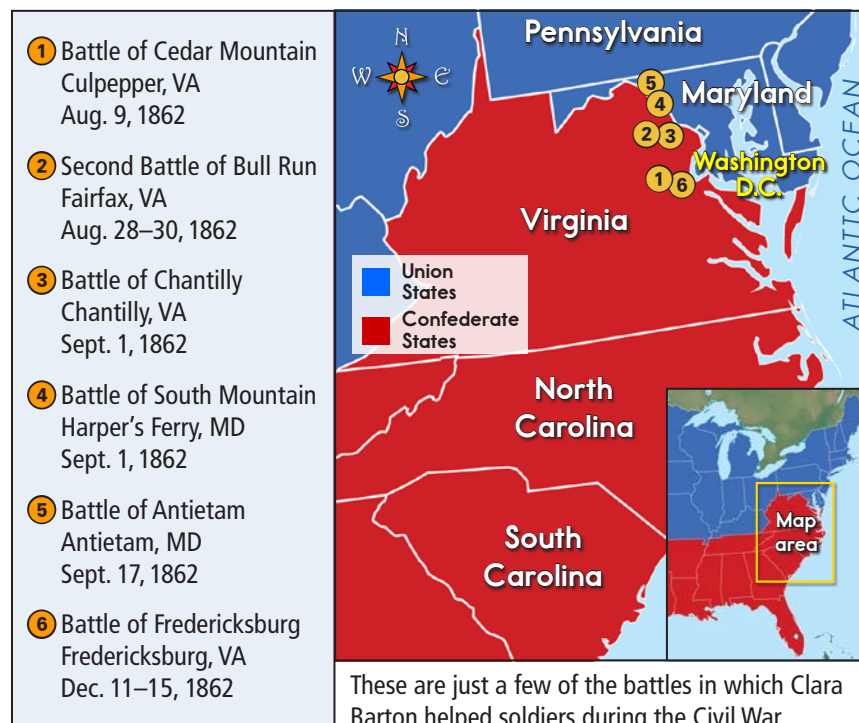
She started by organizing medical supplies for hospitals. However, many soldiers were so badly hurt that they couldn't make it to a hospital—they needed the hospital to come to them. Clara wrote to the government asking for permission to go to the battlefield. The idea of a woman on the front lines was unheard of, but she wouldn't give up. Finally, she received a letter that let her go straight to the fight.

Medicine During the Civil War

During the Civil War, more soldiers died from disease than from battles. At the time, doctors had very few tools and techniques. They could perform some surgery, such as removing arms or legs. Doctors and nurses could do basic first aid, such as stitching wounds and bandaging. Since little was known about germs, diseases and infections spread quickly. Clara had no training as a nurse, but she quickly picked up all there was to know at the time.

Near the battlefields were makeshift hospitals, called **field hospitals**, where Clara found her calling. She braved gunfire to care for injured soldiers, with few helpers and even fewer supplies. She went without sleep, tending to wounded soldiers by candlelight. A bullet tore through her sleeve, grazing her arm, but she never left her post. She cared for Confederate soldiers, even though she was from the North and believed strongly that slavery was wrong. Soldiers called her the “Angel of the Battlefield.”

The United States, 1862



The American Red Cross

After the war, Clara was exhausted. Her doctor advised her to rest, so she went to Europe.

Even there, Clara's work was famous. In Switzerland, a group of leaders wanted to meet her. They were part of a new organization called the International Red Cross, which helped care for wounded and displaced people during wars—no matter what side they were on.



The Geneva Convention

The small European country of Switzerland is located high in the Alps, a mountain range that runs through France, Germany, Italy, and Austria. Its capital, Geneva, has become a place for meetings that create international agreements. The Geneva Convention of 1863 brought sixteen nations together to decide on the rules of war, including how to care for prisoners and wounded soldiers. From this meeting, the International Red Cross was formed.



Organized, well-equipped medical and civilian teams cared for wounded soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War.

The idea electrified Clara, and she immediately joined **volunteers** caring for soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War in France and Germany. There she saw the well-supplied, well-staffed, and well-organized medical teams she could only have dreamed about during the Civil War. Clara vowed to start a similar Red Cross when she returned to the United States.

In 1881, Clara **founded** the American Red Cross, taking on the role of president. The United States was in a period of peace, but the American Red Cross was not idle. Clara made sure the organization stocked food, tents, clothing, money, and medicine ahead of time so it wouldn't have to scramble for supplies during an emergency. She led volunteers into **disaster** zones, helping people left homeless by wildfires in Michigan and flooding on the Mississippi River.



The Johnstown tragedy was remembered in poems, books, and songs.

In May of 1889, a dam near Johnstown, Pennsylvania, suddenly burst. A wall of water swept away the town. Over 2,200 people died in one of the worst disasters the United States had ever known.

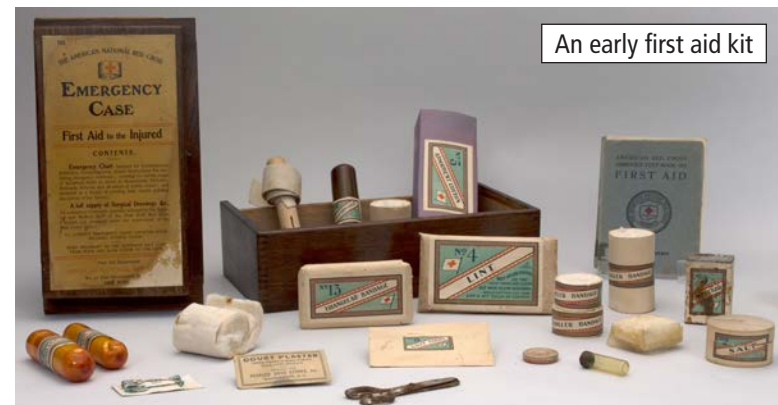
Clara and her Red Cross workers went straight into the devastation. Clara stayed in Johnstown for five months, helping **survivors** rebuild their health and lives. The American Red Cross won the deep admiration of the whole nation.



Clara Barton, 1911

For years, Clara ran the American Red Cross however she saw fit. She used her own money and never kept many records. Before the government would renew the Red Cross's charter or detailed contract, however, it insisted that she make things more official. Clara refused to change her ways. In 1904, she resigned as president.

Clara was now eighty-one-years old, but she wasn't done yet. She started the National First Aid Association of America, which made popular the single-box "first aid kit."



An early first aid kit

As she reached ninety, Clara finally began to slow down. On April 12, 1912, she passed away in her home in Glen Echo, Maryland, surrounded by friends.



An American Red Cross disaster relief van distributes hot meals in Moore, Oklahoma, following a tornado in May 2013.

The Red Cross Today

Clara's work with the American Red Cross was the start of modern **humanitarian** aid. She expanded the role of the Red Cross to include natural disasters as well as war. Today, the Red Cross is often the first organization on the scene of a hurricane, earthquake, or flood. They set up field hospitals to care for people who are hurt and sick. They organize donations and distribute food, clothing, tents, clean water, and medicine.

Clara Barton believed that all people deserve health and dignity. Throughout her long and busy life, she showed how to care for others when they need it most. Today, 97 million volunteers, members, and staff in 187 nations follow in Clara Barton's footsteps.

Glossary

authorized (<i>v.</i>)	given permission or official approval (p. 5)
battlefield (<i>n.</i>)	the location or area where a fight or conflict takes place (p. 4)
careers (<i>n.</i>)	jobs or professions that a person has over a long period of time, usually with opportunities for advancement or greater success (p. 7)
Civil War (<i>n.</i>)	the war between the Northern and Southern states of the United States of America (1861–1865) (p. 8)
disaster (<i>n.</i>)	a sudden event that causes great damage, harm, or loss; an event with a terrible result (p. 12)
field hospitals (<i>n.</i>)	temporary structures, near a battlefield or other emergency situation, where wounded or sick people receive medical care (p. 10)
founded (<i>v.</i>)	created or set up a group or organization (p. 12)
humanitarian (<i>adj.</i>)	of or related to a person or group that helps people, especially by eliminating pain and suffering (p. 15)
purposeful (<i>adj.</i>)	meaningful or important (p. 6)
survivors (<i>n.</i>)	people who have lived through a life-threatening event (p. 13)
tend (<i>v.</i>)	to take care of or give special attention to something or someone (p. 5)
volunteers (<i>n.</i>)	people who offer help or a service without being asked or paid (p. 12)