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### CLARA BARTON NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE (GLEN ECHO, MARYLAND)

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## **CLARA BARTON NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE (GLEN ECHO, MARYLAND)**

The Clara Barton National Historic Site is located two miles northwest of Washington, D.C., in Glen Echo, Maryland. The site includes the Clara Barton House, an early headquarters of the American Red Cross and the home of its founder. This nine-acre property is governed and operated by the National Park Service the cooperation of Maryland's Montgomery County. The site interprets the life of Clara Barton (1821—1914) and the work of the American Red Cross, the organization she presided over for 23 years.

Though always called Clara, the youngest child of Captain Stephen and Sarah Stone Barton was born Clarissa Harlow Barton in Oxford, Massachusetts. Her family had a legacy of military service, and duty was a value instilled early in Clara. She nursed her injured brother David through his 3-year recovery after a bad fall and even cared for neighbors suffering with smallpox. The respect earned by that service gave the shy, introspective Clara satisfaction and confidence in her abilities. Intent on avoiding financial dependency, she took up teaching as a career. She taught for 10 years, even starting a successful free public school in Bordentown, New Jersey. When a male was hired at a higher salary to run the school she established, Barton resigned and abandoned teaching.

Moving to the warmer climate of Washington, D.C., for her health and where she had relatives, Barton secured a paid clerical job with the Patent Office, one of the earliest women to have an official government appointment. She insisted on and received a salary equivalent to male employees. All the while she was enhancing her administrative skills and making influential contacts in the Washington.

When the American Civil War broke out, the government was ill-prepared to deal with the flood of casualties streaming into Washington, D.C. Barton saw the immediate needs of the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment, quartered in the unfinished U.S. Capitol, and independently reached out to families from her home state, who sent generous provisions. She supplemented these donations using her own funds for medicine, bandages, blankets, and food.

Recognizing the great needs of Union soldiers, Barton expanded her relief work, enlisting the aid of friends she had cultivated in high places, including the Military Affairs Committee chair, Senator Henry Wilson. Defying personal danger and the propriety of women on the battlefield, Barton secured passes to transport supplies directly to the front lines.

Barton and her assistants did not shirk from cooking meals, doing laundry, bandaging wounds, praying with dying soldiers, and even offering to write their letters home. Barton's practical compassion helped overcome bureaucratic resistance, and she witnessed the mass destruction of human life. She knew firsthand the untold suffering from the Second Battle of Bull Run and the battles at Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Cedar Mountain. Her sobriquet "Angel of the Battlefield" was well earned.

With President Abraham Lincoln's endorsement, Barton tried to identify the status of soldiers at the close of the war. She advertised in newspapers asking soldiers families to contact her about identifying their loved ones. Over 60,000 letters flowed in, and the Office of Missing Soldiers

helped identify over 22,000 missing soldiers. Barton also brought to light conditions at the Andersonville Prison in Georgia where some 13,000 were buried in mass graves, many having starved. Often accompanied by Dorence Atwater, who had secretly recorded the names of those buried at Andersonville, Barton gave over 300 postwar lectures in northern states from 1866 to 1869. Her speaking fees helped underwrite office expenses in identifying missing, injured, and dead Union soldiers.

By 1869 Barton was in a state of near collapse and went to Europe for a rest. While there, she became aware of the Swiss-inspired International Committee of the Red Cross (founded in 1864) and volunteered her services when the Franco Prussian began in 1870. Upon returning to the United States, Barton lobbied to establish the American Association of the Red Cross (founded in 1877). When incorporated as the American Red Cross in 1881, she was elected its president. The following year the United States adopted the Geneva Convention on humane treatment and protection of prisoners of war.

Beyond international and wartime relief efforts, Barton succeeded in inaugurating the peacetime relief role of the Red Cross during such natural disasters as the 1884 floods of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers; the 1886 Charlestown earthquake; the 1888 Florida yellow fever epidemic; the 1889 Johnstown, Pennsylvania, flood; the 1893 Sea Islands, South Carolina, hurricane; and the Galveston hurricane in 1900.

Though widely honored and revered for her work, Barton faced a failed coup and then a congressional investigation instigated by Red Cross board member Mabel Boardman. Totally vindicated of any wrongdoing, Barton retired her presidency in 1904.

The Friends of Clara Barton gave the Clara Barton House and property to the National Park Service, which designated it a National Historic Site in 1975. Barton had originally received the land and an offer to build a house by brothers Edwin and Edward Baltzley, who hoped that association with her would attract people to their planned Chautauqua community at Glen Echo. They built the house in 1891 using wood recycled from a Red Cross structure erected for Johnstown flood victims. In 1897 the house was remodeled and used as the headquarters of the American Red Cross. With 38 rooms and 72 closets, it was commodious enough to store disaster and relief supplies in addition to housing Barton and a team of volunteers who received free room and board for their work.

Janet Butler Munch

*See also: Andersonville National Historic Site*

#### **Further Reading**

- Burton, H. Chou. *Barton: In the Service of Humanity*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995.
- Pryor, Joan S. "Clara Barton's House: Home of the American Red Cross." *Teaching with Historic Places. Social Education* 60, 2, (February 1996): 119-136.
- "Super Storm: Clara Barton Embarks on a Risky River Quest during the Worst Flood of the 19th Century." *American Historian* 48,1, (April 2013): 68—73.