

Nurturing a Nation

A Salute to Red Cross Founder Clara Barton

"It must grow. I want it to, it is my planting. I should rejoice the crop no matter who harvests it." The words were Clara Barton's. The "crop" was the American Red Cross—and grow it did. In the 129 years since Barton founded the organization, it has become the country's largest relief group with over 30,000 employees and more than half a million volunteers. From international emergencies like the Haiti earthquake, to the local neighborhood house fire, it assists recovery from around 70,000 disasters each year. Today, the administrative center for the agency is in downtown Washington, DC, but for those wanting to see where the place got its start, a trip eight miles out to Glen Echo, Maryland, is in order.

That's where the Clara Barton National Historic Site—early Red Cross headquarters—is located. When Barton was president, the organization only had a paid staff of two, along with all the heart and soul she could give it. "The Red Cross was her life's work," says historian Elizabeth Brown Pryor, author of *Clara Barton: Professional Angel*, who started researching in the mid-'70s when the place became the first National Park Service site to honor a woman. The Steamboat Gothic wood and stone structure, painted a cheery yellow,



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was not just an office. "It was the Red Cross warehouse and headquarters, but also where she lived and where she spent time with her friends and family," says Kimberly Robinson, the site's acting curator. Those who can't make the trip can visit online thanks to a new feature produced by the NPS Museum Management Program. Web viewers can see photographs of almost 300 of the site's 14,000 objects and historic images—sampled here—plus take a virtual tour of the house.

One of America's most accomplished figures, Barton helped institute public education in New Jersey, served as one of America's first federal women employees, campaigned for suffrage, braved Civil War battlefields to nurse the wounded, assisted war and disaster relief

overseas, and worked to promote first aid. "If you add it all up, everyone's life today is better because of Clara Barton," Pryor says.

She lived in Glen Echo during the last 15 years of all that work. The nine-acre property was a gift from Edwin and Edward Baltzley, inventors of a spatterless egg beater that earned enough to purchase the 516-acre tract they named Glen Echo in 1890. The brothers then built a trolley to DC, turned the site into a cultural retreat, and, figuring a little bit of celebrity couldn't hurt, offered Clara Barton a house.

Speculated to have been built with boards from a disassembled Red Cross shelter used during the Johnstown Flood—on which the floor plan is based—the structure spent its first five years as a storage facility. Barton moved there from Washington in 1897. Those with never enough storage space might envy the ample closets everywhere, particularly along the first-floor hallway. "Medicines, bandaging, splints, and crutches . . . spades, hoes, rakes," one of Barton's nieces recalled of the closet contents. "She could have launched a one woman rescue mission at any moment."

ABOVE: Clara Barton in her late 70s. **RIGHT:** Psyche, Greek Goddess of the Soul, offering water to an eagle, a circa 1870 statue at the site.

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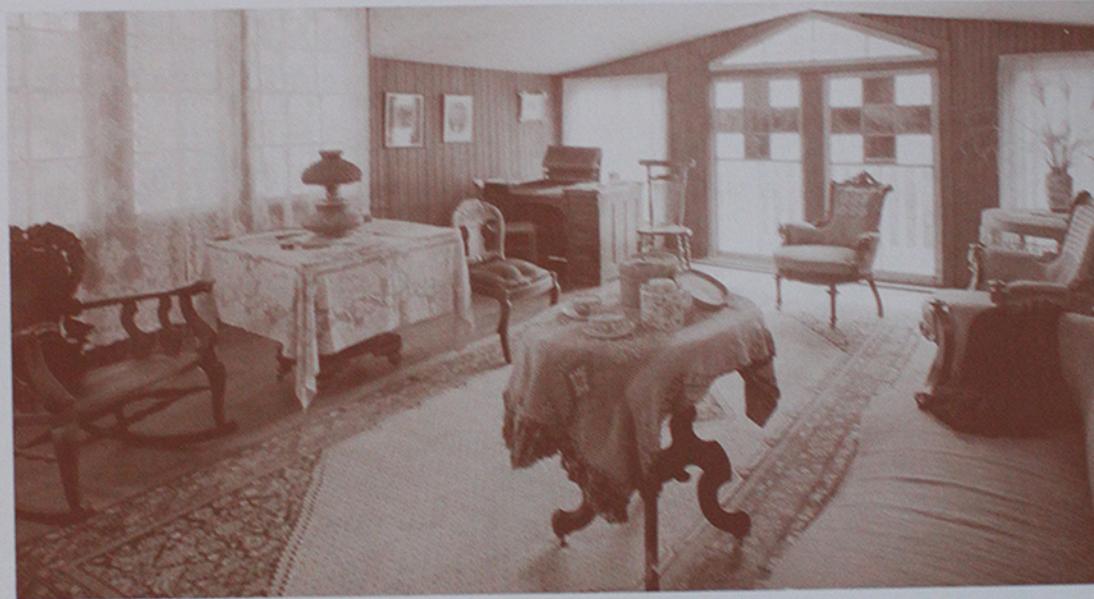




The 38-room house was anything but a storage facility once Barton moved in. Besides being her home and Red Cross headquarters, it doubled as a place to live for volunteers who often stayed for extended periods in the several guest rooms. Barton often invited people to stay, even though she was the first to admit that it was “no plush Victorian showcase.” Never much of a spender, her frugality is evident in the muslin-lined ceilings.

The house, restored to look as it did in the Barton years, boasts original objects such as a circa 1880 velvet upholstered armchair from Turkey and a circa 1870 statue of Psyche, the Greek Goddess of the Soul. Barton spent most of her time in her office, with staff busily bustling about in a connecting room. With a graphophone and a number of Remington, Underwood, and Oliver typewriters, the house was as efficient as any downtown office. Barton’s cubbyhole desk is cluttered with papers, stamps, and writing materials—just as it was in her day—but it’s the chair that says the most about the woman. Oral tradition has it that she had the back sawed off so no one could say she couldn’t sit straight and work as well as a younger person. She had good reason to be suspicious that people would try, having suffered from discrimination all of her life.

LOUISE T. TAFT FOR HABS



THE HOUSE AT GLEN ECHO WOULD FOREVER KEEP THE RED STAINED-GLASS CROSSES THAT BECKON FROM THE UPPER-STORY WINDOWS, THE SWISS INSIGNIA OF NEUTRALITY LETTING VISITORS KNOW THEY ARE WELCOME.

Born Clarissa Harlowe Barton on Christmas Day 1821 in North Oxford, Massachusetts, she was a smart and inquisitive child, and started teaching at the age of 16. She taught for several years in Massachusetts, before moving to Bordentown, New Jersey. When she realized the state did not have free public schools, she started her own and by the end of the first year had 600 students. Residents were so pleased they built a larger one, hiring a man to run it at twice Barton’s salary.

Not wanting to be an assistant at the school she founded, she left for Washington, in 1854 becoming one of the first federal women workers—a recording clerk for the U.S. Patent Office—earning the same as a man. That is, until she was demoted to copyist and laid off because the Secretary of the Interior did not approve of women employees.

With Lincoln’s presidency her copyist job returned, and she found her calling. In April 1861, with injured and weary soldiers arriving in Washington, Barton learned the Army had nothing to give them. She was soon visiting field hospitals and battlefields far and wide—and though a Union supporter herself—caring for soldiers on both sides of the conflict. She provided medicine, food, and clothing—it was a dangerous job, with a bullet once flying through her sleeve—earning her

the nickname “angel of the battlefield.” Her Civil War work did not end with the surrender at Appomattox. She led the search for the thousands who never returned home, establishing the Office of Correspondence with Friends of the Missing Men. The four-year project, which garnered more than 63,000 requests, got 22,000 off the missing lists. Barton was instrumental in identifying nearly 13,000 unmarked graves at Andersonville National Cemetery; a note featured in the exhibit names one of the soldiers.

With money always a struggle, she supported herself by lecturing about her war experiences, using the podium to speak out about

women’s rights. Friends with leaders of the suffragist movement, she wanted the right to vote. But what she really wanted was for women to be able to earn an income. “She knew that the vote itself wouldn’t earn women their freedom,” Pryor says. Ironically, it was her work on the battlefield that did more in this regard. Before the Civil War, nursing was a men-only profession; women like Barton literally changed the face of the job.

In 1869, she sailed to Europe where she met Dr. Louis Appia, a founder of the International Committee of the Red Cross, an organization that essentially did what she had done on the battlefields. The committee was working on the Treaty of Geneva, an international agreement that in war all injured would receive treatment no matter their allegiance, and that medical personnel would be considered neutral. Thirty-two countries had signed; America had not. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out, Barton saw the group’s

LEFT: Turkish velvet armchair, a gift from the Ottoman Empire for Barton’s relief efforts during the Turkish-Armenian conflict of the 1890s. ABOVE: The Red Cross Room on the third floor of the Barton house. At night, she often put a lamp behind the stained glass to light up the red crosses.

strength and lent her support. A volunteer on the front lines, she earned a number of medals and pins seen in the web feature and in several photographs—Barton loved wearing them to add touches of color to her otherwise somber outfits.

Health problems sent her back to the states, where in 1877 after rest she turned to starting a Red Cross branch—a lofty goal, since the government wanted to avoid alliances and didn't think the Red Cross was needed. But Barton was shrewd and after five years of campaigning, strategizing, and frustration, she succeeded. In 1882, the Senate unanimously ratified the treaty. "It was an enormous thing," Pryor says. "We didn't sign treaties and the fact that she was able to change that was a huge achievement." The American Red Cross followed.

The following 20 years were some of the busiest Barton ever knew. Very hands-on as president, she visited 18 disaster sites,

years, Barton wrote *The Story of My Childhood*, the first of a planned series of autobiographies, never written. She now had time for drawing, needlepoint, and rocking in her wicker chair on the back porch overlooking the Potomac.

Barton died of pneumonia at the age of 90 on April 12, 1912. She left her house to Hubbell, who managed it briefly before losing it to a woman who claimed Barton willed it to her during a séance. Hubbell eventually got the property back and willed it to his nieces, but not before some of the furnishings were sold. The Franks sisters, who bought the house from the Hubbells in 1942, repurchased some of it. Instrumental in preserving the house with other fans of the late humanitarian, they formed the Friends of Clara Barton, Inc., helping get the place designated as a national historic landmark before it eventually became a national historic site and unit of the National Park System.



WITH MONEY ALWAYS A STRUGGLE, SHE SUPPORTED HERSELF BY LECTURING ABOUT HER WAR EXPERIENCES, USING THE PODIUM TO SPEAK OUT ABOUT WOMEN'S RIGHTS.

usually with chief field agent Dr. Julian Hubbell, her trusted friend and partner. Barton's tenure ended on a sour note, however. Some in the organization raised charges that she was unfit and used donations for herself. While Barton was not the best bookkeeper—administrative change was needed—some claims were vindictive, one alleging that she had mothered children out of wedlock. Although Barton was ultimately cleared of the charges, in 1904 she resigned. The agency's headquarters were moved to Washington, DC, although the house at Glen Echo would forever keep the red stained-glass crosses that beckon from the upper-story windows, the Swiss insignia of neutrality letting visitors know that they are welcome.

Barton, age 83 at this point, just kept going, a year later establishing the National First Aid Association of America, offering classes in basic medical assistance to mill, factory, and railroad workers. At first, the Red Cross snubbed the idea, then offered classes of its own, and the association disbanded in support of that effort. In her final

In the early 1900s, the cultural retreat had been turned into an amusement park; a photo in the web exhibit shows the house with a roller coaster around it, an attempt to drive Barton and her house off the land. It didn't work, of course, but Robinson says that had the Franks casually sold the property, it would likely be part of what is today Glen Echo Park with the house long gone. That would have been a sad fate for a place that "symbolizes everything she was able to accomplish," Robinson says.

ABOVE LEFT: Detail from Barton's silk bodice. **ABOVE CENTER:** Photographed probably in the early 1870s. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Detail from Barton's boar-bristle hat brush. **RIGHT:** Her Standard Visible Writer, No. 5, manufactured by the Chicago Oliver Typewriter Co. in the early 1900s.

