

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Clara Barton

By **Marian Moser Jones**, University of Maryland College Park

When the bloody and bedraggled Massachusetts Militia volunteers arrived at the Washington train depot on the evening of April 19, 1861, following the deadly Baltimore riot, they were met by a group of local residents eager to help them. Among these was a 39-year-old patent clerk named Clara Barton, who recognized some of these men as former pupils from her earlier years as a Massachusetts schoolteacher.

The opening salvos of the war had occurred only a week earlier, with the secessionists' firing on Fort Sumter in South Carolina. President Lincoln had responded by calling up 75,000 state militia troops to Washington to protect the nation's capital from Confederate attacks. The Massachusetts militia had assembled, like those in Pennsylvania, New York, and other states, and headed to Washington by train. But in Baltimore, these soldiers had been forced to march across town in order to change trains, and a mob of residents sympathetic to the secessionist cause had followed them, pelting them with paving stones and other objects, and blocking their way toward the train. In the ensuing melee, 36 soldiers had been wounded and four killed, along with 12 civilians.¹

News of the Baltimore riot had quickly reached Washington via telegraph, sending Barton and others hurrying to the station to greet the soldiers and offer assistance. Finding the wounded without any medical care, and others stripped of their packs and equipment, Barton quickly arranged for the most seriously wounded soldiers to be nursed and lodged at her sister's home in Washington. Next she gathered all of the food and supplies she could purchase for the others, who were quartered in the Senate Chamber of the Capitol building. After distributing these items, Barton perched on the vice president's seat in the Senate and read to them from a recent copy she had procured of the *Worcester Spy*, her hometown newspaper.²

The soldiers were grateful for this attention, and Barton thereafter resolved to do everything in her power to aid the troops. Although a few patriotic Northern women

¹ "First Blood: The Sixth Massachusetts Regiment Fighting Their Way through Baltimore, Apr. 19, 1861," *Harper's Weekly*, May 4, 1861, 283 cited in Marian Moser Jones, *The American Red Cross from Clara Barton to the New Deal* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 7.

² Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Clara Barton: Professional Angel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 78-79.

cross-dressed and joined the Union Army under men's names,³ Barton, at just over five feet tall, with a round, apple-cheeked face, striking feminine features, and long, dark hair, would not have been convincing had she tried to pass as a male soldier. Instead, she overcame doubts that she could do little because she was “only a woman,” and dedicated her time and resources during the remainder of the conflict to providing food, supplies, comfort, and nursing aid to soldiers. While many women offered volunteer aid to the poorly-supplied Union and Confederate armies, Barton distinguished herself by venturing onto active battlefields, despite overwhelming social prohibitions against women doing so. She also gained wide renown by recounting these experiences with dramatic flair, in letters to friends published in newspapers during the war, and in speeches she gave on the lecture circuit during the postwar years.⁴

Barton's upbringing and prior life provide several clues as to why she disregarded convention and thrust herself into the middle of the Civil War. Born in Oxford, Massachusetts in 1821, Barton was the youngest and fifth child of Captain Stephen Barton, a veteran of the post-Revolutionary War campaigns against American Indians in Michigan. Her father delighted in telling battle tales, as young Clara sat at his knee and “listened breathlessly” to them or acted them out. Her elder brothers taught her to ride horses, ice skate on frozen streams, and engage in other rough-and-tumble outdoor play. While Barton's mother and elder sisters instructed her in the traditionally feminine arts of cooking, sewing, keeping a household, and nursing ailing relatives, her mother was also an outspoken advocate of women's rights and abolitionism. Barton's parents had bucked tradition in leaving the Baptist congregations where they were raised, and had embraced Universalism, an ecumenical Christian denomination whose adherents believed that people of all faiths, not just Christians, could be saved and go to heaven. The fact that Barton felt free not to marry, and to pursue occupations formerly reserved for men, speaks to this unusual upbringing. Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, middle-class white women who rejected their prescribed roles as mothers and homemakers were viewed with suspicion and often ostracized. But Barton managed to avoid ostracism by turning her occupations into moral crusades.⁵

Although shy and socially awkward, Barton was an apt student, and by 1839, began teaching in the one-room schoolhouses near her family home. After a decade as a schoolteacher in Worcester County, Massachusetts, Barton furthered her education by spending a year at the Clinton Liberal Institute, a coeducational institution established by the Universalist Church in Clinton, New York. She then returned to teaching in 1851 in Hightstown, New Jersey, where the family of a close friend lived. Barton bemoaned the fact that New Jersey had no free, public schools, leaving those children who could not afford an education idle, so she began campaigning for the establishment of a public school in the state. Through dogged persistence with officials in Trenton, the state capital,

³ Deanne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

⁴ William E. Barton, *The Life of Clara Barton, Founder of the American Red Cross* 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 1:129, 194. Pryor, *Professional Angel*, 87-93. Jones, *American Red Cross*, 8.

⁵ Barton, *Life of Clara Barton*, 17-21, 39.

Barton obtained a building and funds to run a public school in Bordentown, New Jersey as an experiment. The success of this project in its first year led local leaders to appoint a principal for the school—a man they brought in from out of town. Barton was so distressed at the fact that she had been overlooked for this position, and on account of her sex, that she became physically ill and unable to work or speak. In February 1854, she and another female teacher resigned from their positions at the Bordentown School in protest. Together, they boarded a train for Washington to seek work as governesses. There, Barton met with Congressman Alexander DeWitt, the representative from her district and a distant cousin, who initially found her a position as a governess in the household of his friend, the Commissioner of Patents. But DeWitt was so impressed with Barton that he convinced the commissioner to instead appoint Barton as one of the first female clerks at the U.S. Patent Office.⁶

Barton's intelligence, work ethic, and excellent penmanship helped her to succeed at this position, which involved tedious and long hours copying volumes of technical legal writing with pen and ink. She soon became clerk to the Secretary of Patents. However, some of her male colleagues resented her intrusion into this formerly masculine domain. Each day, as she walked down the corridor to her desk, they would spit tobacco juice at her, make lewd remarks, and blow cigar smoke in her face. The animosity reached such a level that Barton's superiors removed her and then reinstated her as a "temporary" clerk, requiring her to work in her small boardinghouse room, by candlelight, to avoid further conflict. The work nevertheless enabled Barton to experience a rare degree of social and financial independence for a woman of her era. She was paid the same yearly salary as the male clerks, and saved much of her earnings. This position also allowed Barton to take part in the political and social life of Washington. She attended the theater and levees—receptions offered by members of Congress, cabinet officers, and other government officials; and she sat in the galleries of the Capitol to hear the great elected orators of the day. In 1856, she witnessed her Massachusetts Senator, Charles Sumner, deliver his vehement denouncement of slavery and its expansion in the West. When she learned of Sumner's brutal caning the next day by South Carolina Congressman Chester Pierce Butler, she was awakened to the degree of hostility that was beginning to divide the country. Later, she concluded that the war "began not at Sumter, but with Sumner."⁷

In 1857, when James Buchanan and his proslavery Democratic administration swept its broom through the offices of the capital city to clean out the patronage jobs of the previous administration, Barton lost her clerkship. Congressman DeWitt, a fierce opponent of slavery, had lost his election as had Barton's other allies. She was forced to return home to Massachusetts, where she struggled to find a place for herself. By late 1860, she felt she had overstayed her welcome at the home of a brother and his wife in Worcester, Massachusetts, and traveled to New York City to stay with friends for a few months and seek clerical work. The November, 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln as

⁶ Pryor, *Professional Angel*, 45-54.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

president, however, brought Barton's allies into power once again. She returned to Washington and resumed her work in the Patent Office.⁸

The arrival of the Massachusetts militia in Washington following the outbreak of war soon complicated this arrangement. While continuing to work at the Patent Office, Barton began to devote increasing time to collecting and distributing food and supplies for these and other troops. By June 1861, she moved into a business office with room to store the boxes of provisions that she was continually receiving from Massachusetts. Due to the lack of military organization among the Union army and the prioritization of munitions over medical aid and supplies, the regiments remained in desperate need of food, clothing, and bandages, along with personal items such as combs, handkerchiefs, and tobacco. Barton stepped into this organizational vacuum. The overwhelming need that she encountered when she went to visit the soldiers at the newly established Washington military hospitals during the summer of 1861 spurred her to step up her work, actively soliciting supplies and opening a warehouse for them.⁹

Barton was hardly alone in her efforts. Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the nation's first female physician, together with other prominent New York City women and men, in late April 1861 organized the Women's Central Association of Relief to gather supplies and screen nurses to be provided to Union troops. With President Lincoln's approval, the group was soon re-organized as the male-led U.S. Sanitary Commission, a privately funded but government-sanctioned agency to supply Union troops with doctors, nurses, food, and medicine. These men aimed to "systematize the impulsive, disorderly, and uninformed sympathies and efforts of the women of the country," they said. Women nevertheless remained indispensable to the operation of the Sanitary Commission throughout the war, running sanitary fairs throughout the Union at which they raised funds and collected supplies for the troops.¹⁰

Meanwhile, in late April 1861, President Lincoln appointed another Massachusetts woman, Dorothea Lynde Dix, to organize nurses in Union Army Hospitals. Dix, who had worked since the 1840s to abolish prison-like conditions for the mentally ill and establish more humane asylums, was not a trained nurse. At the time, Blackwell had established one of the first hospital-based training programs for female nurses in the United States (as Florence Nightingale did in London). Up until this time, nursing was generally not considered an occupation; rather, it was a duty for which women were designed "by nature and providence," in the words of popular advice writer William Alcott.¹¹ Although some women did work as private nurses in the homes of non-relatives, or in hospitals, these nurses endured damage to their reputations due to the necessity for nurses to have close contact with male patients who were not family

⁸ Jones, *American Red Cross*, 5-6.

⁹ Pryor, *Professional Angel*, 79-81.

¹⁰ Jeannie Attie, *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 39-44, 52-56.

¹¹ William A. Alcott, *The Young Wife, or Duties of the Woman in the Marriage Relation* (Boston: George W. Light, 1838), 262.

members. To combat this stigma and minimize the danger that nurses might become involved in questionable relationships with patients, Dix insisted that she would only hire “plain-faced” women over 30 as nurses in the Army hospitals, and rejected one young nurse applicant instantly on account of her “youth and rosy cheeks.” Barton, a strong-headed and independent woman, was not about to sign up as an army nurse and submit herself to Dix’s orders. Neither did Barton want to focus her Civil War efforts on nursing in hospitals. While some historians have referred to Barton as a Civil War nurse, she herself rejected this designation throughout her life, and instead referred to herself as a volunteer who mobilized material aid in war and other emergencies. “My work was, and chiefly has been, to get timely supplies to those needing,” Barton said in 1908 as she looked back on her life.¹²

After a few months of her initial efforts to supply troops in Washington and its new hospitals, Barton realized that the need for this work so was diminishing, as the hospitals were becoming well organized. Barton’s landlady, Almira Fales of South Danvers, Massachusetts, had been taking supplies collected from people in her hometown directly to the wounded and sick soldiers on arriving trains and hospital ships, and had been one of the first women to venture out onto the line of battle to treat soldiers’ wounds. Barton followed in Fales’ footsteps. Soon she began to realize that such early treatment could help save the lives of soldiers: By the time they reached the Washington hospitals, hours or even days after being wounded it was often too late.¹³

Barton began direct battlefield assistance with Fales in August 1862. Earlier that year, she had taken leave of her Patent Office position to care for her dying father back in Oxford, Massachusetts. Even as she attended her father’s deathbed in late March, she penned letters to Massachusetts’ Governor John Andrew asking for permission to accompany Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside’s regiment, which was fighting in Virginia, to “administer comfort to our brave men”.¹⁴ On the day of her father’s funeral she received a friendly reply and an assurance that the governor would recommend her to Burnside. But when she returned to Washington later that spring after wrapping up her late father’s affairs, Union officers, who were not in the habit of granting battlefield passes to women, stood in her way. These officers believed that any woman would flee once faced with the dangers of battle. But such claims only made Barton more insistent. Finally, in July 1862, after she informed an army quartermaster that she had filled her lodging rooms and three warehouses with desperately needed hospital stores and supplies, the quartermaster reluctantly granted her a pass. At once grateful and resentful, she vowed not to “either run or complain” if she was “left under fire.”¹⁵

¹² Henrietta Stratton Jaquette, ed. *Letters of a Civil War Nurse: Cornelia Hancock, 1863-1865* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1998), 3; Pryor, *Professional Angel*, 234.

¹³ “Fales, Almira L.” in James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, eds., *Appleton’s Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 6 vols., 1900 ed. (New York: D. Appleton, 1887), 2:404, available at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Appletons%27_Cyclop%C3%A6dia_of_American_Biography/Fales,_Almira_L., accessed June 15, 2015; Pryor, *Professional Angel*, 87-93.

¹⁴ William Barton, *Life of Clara Barton*, 1:157-9.

¹⁵ Pryor, *Professional Angel*, 85.

The horrors of mid-19th century warfare made that a difficult vow to keep. The conical bullets from the combatants' .58 caliber rifles ripped through flesh and pulverized bones; iron cannonballs decapitated oncoming infantry and tore through limbs. The Union army had not prepared for such advances in munitions technology and the mass carnage they produced. Thus it had radically undersupplied its disorganized Medical Corps. Civil War surgery also left much to be desired. Amputations near the battlefield were common, and they carried a twenty-seven percent mortality rate among Union troops. Although surgeons generally used ether or chloroform as an anesthetic and many surgical advances were made during the war, it occurred before the advent of germ theory. Doctors were not careful to clean instruments or to sterilize wounds, and many soldiers died of infection. Civilians living near the theater of war were targeted by both sides as well; their property was confiscated, they were hit by stray shells, and sometimes were raped or shot for their allegiances. The large-scale casualties of this war and the involvement of civilians, some scholars have argued, heralded the dawn of modern warfare.¹⁶

The first instance where Barton provided direct battlefield aid occurred just after the Battle of Cedar Mountain (also known as Cedar Run or Slaughter's Mountain). The battle, which took place on August 9, 1862 in Culpepper County, Virginia between Major General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson's Confederate brigades and Union forces under Major General Nathaniel Prentice Banks, resulted in a victory for the Confederates, who outnumbered Union troops more than two to one. The engagement produced over 2,700 casualties, with equal numbers on both sides. Barton and her associates arrived at the scene of the battle four days after it had occurred, and found a scene beyond imagining: surgeons were desperately under-equipped and scores of wounded men lay about in the August sun, untreated and without food or water. Barton's supplies were welcomed and desperately needed. She also visited the Confederate hospital, where soldiers were being neglected in favor of Union troops, and offered supplies to them as well. Although Barton's sympathies lay with the Union, throughout the war she maintained an impartial attitude toward wounded soldiers. Her role as a provider of triage and comfort led her to view the war primarily as a landscape of human suffering, in which the allegiances of the wounded held less importance than the fact of their pain. After the war, this impartial attitude toward alleviating suffering found fuller expression in Barton's work with the American Red Cross, in which she sought to provide "neutral" humanitarian aid to all people affected by conflicts or catastrophe regardless of their nationality, religion, or sex.¹⁷

Barton next became involved in battlefield assistance during the Second Battle of Bull Run, on Sunday, August 31, 1862, and the Battle of Chantilly, which followed it. Having distributed most of her supplies in Cedar Mountain and at Washington hospitals after returning to the capital, she was caught empty-handed when she learned that the battle was in progress. Barton quickly obtained additional stores from the U.S. Sanitary

¹⁶ Jones, *American Red Cross*, 8-9.

¹⁷ "Battle of Cedar Mountain," National Park Service Brochure. <http://www.nps.gov/frsp/cedar.htm>, accessed June 15, 2015.

Commission, and traveled by train to Fairfax Station, Virginia, with Fales and several others. “Our coaches were not elegant or commodious [comfortable]; they had no windows, no seats, no platforms, no steps, a slide door on the side was the only entrance,” she recalled. When the workers reached the field, they found “three thousand suffering men” who had been laid out on the ground, “crowded upon the few acres within our reach.” Barton immediately started a campfire and began to cook with several pots and pans she had brought along. Others began dressing wounds and wrapping the wounded men in blankets. Having brought few serving implements, they used jelly jars and other improvised containers to feed the men. The next day, as the Union soldiers fell back into this triage area and Confederate cavalry approached amid looming thunderstorms, Fales and the other women left. But Barton stayed. “I knew I should never leave a wounded man there if I were taken prisoner forty times,” she later stated, with the melodrama that characterized her stories of the war. After two days of sleepless work, providing men with food and water and tending to wounds, she returned to her tent, only to discover it had become flooded in the storms. She later recalled that she managed to catch a catnap by leaning against a box in the water, before returning to load the wounded men onto the train and provide them food and water for their trip to the hospital. After Barton finished loading the last wounded soldiers onto the train, she hopped in. As the train chugged away, Confederates galloped up to the train station to burn it down.¹⁸

Barton rested in Washington for a week or so before heading out again to the battlefields in nearby Virginia. This time, a Union Army general who was grateful for Barton’s assistance in prior battles lent her an army wagon and four men to serve as her assistants. When she heard that a battle had begun at Harpers Ferry, a strategic hamlet nestled on the border of Maryland and Virginia, she loaded up the wagon and headed toward the action. By the time Barton and her assistants had arrived, however, General Robert E. Lee’s Confederate troops had captured Harper’s Ferry and routed Major General George Brinton McClellan’s Union forces from the area. On the evening of September 14, as cannon smoke settled over the rocky battlefield where the Union troops had suffered defeat at the battle of South Mountain, Barton and her assistants found many unburied, mangled bodies, dead horses, and discarded equipment strewn around the hills. Determined to catch the next battle at an earlier, more useful stage, Barton and her assistants decided to follow the Union Army wagon train, which was headed for Sharpsburg, Maryland. Along the way, they found and fed straggling and demoralized Union soldiers. They soon realized, however, that they were so far behind the army wagon train that they would arrive at the next battlefield too late to be of any use. So when the wagons stopped for the night, Barton and her team decided to wake up at 1:00 a.m., pack up, and drive to the front of the line. In this daring stunt, Barton distinguished herself among women volunteers: even Fales stayed behind in Washington rather than risk her life in what was already becoming a war of attrition. Barton and her crew arrived at Sharpsburg ahead of the Union ammunition, and were positioned right on the northern edge of the battlefield at dawn as the opening shots rang out for the Battle of Antietam—the bloodiest day in American military history.

¹⁸ Jones, *American Red Cross*, 9.

Barton's actions at Antietam earned her the nickname "Angel of the Battlefield." After the cannon fire began on the morning of September 17th, Barton and her team began wading through eye-high corn at the northern edge of the battlefield, just behind the big guns on Major General Joseph Hooker's Union Army lines, to find the wounded who were falling back. They came upon a farmhouse whose owner, Joseph Poffenberger, had fled with his family as the army arrived. There they found two Army doctors who were using the house as an operating room. The doctors and their assistants were up to their elbows in blood, but with few bandages and almost no supplies. They and their assistants were using corn stalks to bind up men's gaping wounds. Barton and her team quickly unloaded their bandages and supplies, and Barton began assisting in the surgeries. While the retreat of Union forces into their midst led the male surgical assistants to flee, Barton remained, and ventured out frequently, under fire, to retrieve casualties. On one occasion, she recalled later in her speaking tours, she was reaching down to give a drink to a man lying wounded on the ground, when "a bullet sped its free and easy way between" them; it tore a hole in her sleeve and "found its way into his body." In another instance, she used a pocketknife to surgically remove a bullet from a young soldier's face. While helping a soft-faced soldier with chest wounds, Barton discovered that the soldier was a woman named Mary Galloway. Barton sympathetically aided the young woman, kept her secret, and later helped her locate her lover—who was to become her husband—in a Washington hospital. Barton later recalled that the couple named their daughter after her.¹⁹

Barton's efforts barely made a dent in the casualty figures for that day, which numbered 22,700, including 3,650 dead and 17,300 wounded. But the news of her exploits spread quickly and helped to shore up morale, especially among the Medical Corps. The battle itself, though hardly a decisive victory for the Union, constituted a turning point in the war, in demonstrating that the Confederate army, however clever its Generals and battle plans, could not easily penetrate Union territory. It thus quelled popular fears that the Union was about to collapse and dissuaded European would-be supporters of the Confederacy from offering support to the secessionists.²⁰

After working for twenty-four hours straight at Antietam, Barton returned to Washington and collapsed with a likely case of typhoid fever. It took her over a month to regain her strength and return to the battle. At the end of October, Barton and her wagon once again joined the Union's Army of the Potomac, which had returned to Harpers Ferry while the Confederates had retreated to Culpeper. She traveled with the army for weeks and enjoyed making friends with the lower-ranking soldiers, whom she affectionately referred to as "my boys". After returning to Washington with some sick soldiers and gathering more supplies, she again headed south in early December to meet the Army of the Potomac, which was encamped across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg,

¹⁹ Pryor, *Professional Angel*, 99-104; Barton, *Life of Clara Barton*, 201.

²⁰ "Casualties of Battle," National Park Service Antietam web site.

<http://www.nps.gov/anti/learn/historyculture/casualties.htm>, accessed June 15, 2015.

Virginia.²¹

At Fredericksburg, Barton and her assistants found that the Confederates had turned the abandoned city into a garrison. They were highly prepared to repel the assault by Union troops. The Union troops had not received shipments of pontoons for making bridges across the Rappahannock until after the Confederate snipers were in prime position to attack these troops as they crossed the river. General Burnside, now in command of the Army of the Potomac, had become aware of the situation but refused to change the previous plan to cross the river and mount a direct attack on the city. The battle commenced on December 12, and as the Union troops began to cross over to Fredericksburg by boat and bridge, they suffered heavy casualties. Barton, encamped on the far side of the river, received a written note from doctors at a Union army hospital that she and her supplies were desperately needed. A wounded Confederate officer to whom she had offered aid tried to persuade her not to go, but she insisted. Under heavy artillery fire, Barton proceeded across the swaying pontoon bridge to reach the field hospital. As an officer helped her over debris at the end of the bridge, a shell exploded inches from her, and she lost a corner of her skirt. “The next instant a solid shot thundered over our heads, a noble steed bounded in the air, and, with his gallant rider, rolled in the dirt, not thirty feet in the rear.” Undaunted, Barton proceeded to the hospital.²²

During the battle, Barton rushed from house to house to tend to wounded men. On one occasion, she was directed to a man who had been shot in the face and was suffocating from the bleeding around his nose and mouth. She began to wipe the blood off of the man’s face, and eventually his features began to seem familiar. When his eyes opened, she recognized the Sexton of her church in North Oxford.²³

The battle subsided after four days, with over 9,000 casualties, including 4,000 Union troops. At the end of the battle, Barton left the city and crossed the river back to the Union encampment, to tend to the wounded at Lacy House, an elegant antebellum mansion that had been converted to a hospital. The scene that greeted her there—a chaotic mess of wounded men sprawled across tables, china cabinets, and dressers; the floors slippery with blood; the veranda piled with limbs— continued to haunt Barton for years afterwards. The scene symbolized for her the cruel inefficiency of the Union Army Medical Corps, as well as highlighting her inability to stem the tide of suffering. Like the legions of wartime aid workers who have followed in her footsteps, Barton recognized that the soldiers’ need for aid far outstripped her capabilities to help them. “It is no light thing to travel days and nights among acres of wounded and dying men, to feel that your last mouthful is gone and still they famish at your feet,” she wrote a friend shortly afterwards.²⁴

²¹ Barton, *Life of Clara Barton*, 142.

²² *Ibid.*, 217.

²³ *Ibid.*, 217-8.

²⁴ Jones, *American Red Cross*, 10.

As 1862 drew to a close, Barton once again returned to Washington, as dispirited as anyone on the Union side. The assistance she had provided during the battles in the second half of that year—Cedar Mountain, Second Bull Run, Chantilly, South Mountain, Antietam, and Fredericksburg—nevertheless proved to be Barton’s most important contribution to the war. Her independence and her connections to numerous sources of supply had enabled her to respond quickly to address emergency needs that the poorly organized Union army had left unmet. These efforts reduced the suffering of the soldiers, if only by a little, and lifted their badly sagging morale.

After this early period, the Army Medical Corps became better organized, as did citizens’ efforts to supply it. The Sanitary Commission collected and produced as much as \$15 million in supplies through sanitary fairs and other events held by approximately ten thousand auxiliaries run by women across the Union. With these funds, it distributed wagonloads of food and medical supplies at battlefields, often before army supplies arrived. The commission also set up refreshment stands for soldiers, developed systems to evacuate soldiers to hospitals, and supplied doctors and nurses to the Union army.²⁵

In April 1863 Barton traveled to Hilton Head, South Carolina, to provide support for the Union’s southern flank as they prepared to mount an assault on the Confederate stronghold Fort Wagner. She soon discovered that there was little to do but wait with the troops in Beaufort, a port city that had been captured by the Union navy early in the war. Finally, the first assault began July 11, followed by a bombardment from land and sea. In a second assault on July 18, columns of Union troops marched toward the fort, as Barton watched from her relief tent along the beach. Led by the 54th Massachusetts (USCT) Regiment, they marched and fell headlong into a firestorm of Confederate artillery coming from the protected fort. Barton soon raced out onto the battlefield to treat Union soldiers’ wounds. “There, with the shot and shell flying and whispering about her, we find this noble and heroic Worcester woman stopping over the wounded soldier, tenderly administering to our brave men,” a war correspondent from Massachusetts wrote in adulation. Eventually, Fort Wagner fell to the Union in September, but at the cost of 1,515 Union lives and only 174 Confederate lives.²⁶

The experience of seeing black and white soldiers die bravely side by side confirmed for Barton that African American men, whether slave or free, possessed as much humanity as white men. “I can never forget the patient bravery with which [black soldiers] endured their wounds received in the cruel assault upon Wagner, as hour after hour they lay in the wet sands, just back of the growling guns waiting their turn for the knife or the splint and bandage,” she wrote years later. Until this experience at Fort Wagner, Barton had not actively supported the abolition of slavery. But as she herself aspired to the “manly” virtues of courage under fire and fearlessness before death, seeing African American soldiers embody these same virtues on the battlefield convinced her

²⁵ Attie, *Patriotic Toil*, 3.

²⁶ National Park Service, Civil War Sites Advisory Commission (CWSAC) Battle Summaries. “Fort Wagner/Morris Island.” <http://www.nps.gov/abpp/battles/sc007.htm>. Accessed June 15, 2015.

that they amply deserved freedom and enfranchisement.²⁷

Barton was also moved to support the cause of African American freedmen and women through her friendship with Frances Gage, an ardent abolitionist who had come to the Sea Islands to help run the plantations there. Northern radicals ran these captured plantations as a demonstration to skeptical white landowners that freed blacks could be as productive in their work as those held in bondage. This “Port Royal experiment,” in which local black residents and freed slaves from the mainland worked rice and cotton plantations that had been abandoned by white owners at the war’s onset, was designed to disprove white Southerners’ arguments that freed slaves had no work ethic and that the slave system was therefore necessary to the economic success of the land. During her time in the Sea Islands, Barton met many of the African Americans who were taking part in this experiment, and sporadically taught black children to read. At a hospital in Beaufort, she also met Susie King Taylor, a literate former slave who was traveling with her husband’s company, the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first black regiment organized by the Union Army. Taylor cared for the men of the regiment, provided housekeeping and cooking, as well as treating the wounded and teaching the men to write. In this nurturing, morale-building and sometimes dangerous work, Taylor served a similar function as that which Clara Barton had performed with the Army of the Potomac. Like Barton, she also later wrote compellingly about her Civil War work experiences.²⁸

By the time Barton left South Carolina at the end of December 1863, the once-welcoming attitude of Union Generals had begun to turn into resentment. During the long siege of Fort Wagner, Barton had remained in her tent with the advancing army, and had not hesitated to complain on the soldiers’ behalf about their lack of food and supplies. The Generals perceived this advocacy as outside interference. Furthermore, after the Fort was finally taken, Barton had found herself with little to do, and quickly came to be seen as a superfluous distraction from military objectives. Dorothea Dix’s nurses and the Union Medical Corps were well established in this area and had developed their own procedures for medical aid. Barton remained unwilling to turn over her supplies to them or submit to their system or organization, and they did not welcome the involvement of a headstrong freelancer. Barton returned to Washington, feeling humiliated and dejected. She did not brighten up until the following spring, when the casualties mounted during Ulysses S. Grant’s relentless campaign in the wilderness of Spotsylvania County, and once again the Union army needed her. For a few months, Barton provided aid to wounded soldiers from this campaign at hospitals in Fredericksburg. Then in June 1864, she met Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler, who assigned her to superintend nursing at a Union army hospital in Point of Rocks, Virginia. Barton took to this

²⁷ Stephen B. Oates, *A Woman of Valor: Clara Barton and the Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 173.

²⁸ Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C. Volunteers* (Boston: Self-published, 1902), 30.

assignment with her characteristic energy, cooking massive volumes of applesauce, pudding, eggs, and pies, and tending to the wounded with a personal, maternal touch. Although she clashed with some of Dix's nurses, this problem soon disappeared when the hospital became a mobile flying unit, packing up its tents, then setting up camp nearer the Army at Petersburg. Barton, more soldier than nurse, was the only woman who followed the hospital into the battle.

In early 1865, Barton was forced to turn her focus toward urgent family matters. Her older brother Stephen, who had been living in North Carolina before and during the war, had been captured by the Union Army and imprisoned. During his imprisonment he had become frail and sick. Barton successfully secured Stephen's freedom through her friend General Butler, then tried to nurse her brother back to health. But Stephen worsened, and she resigned her hospital position to continue to nurse him in Washington. He died in March, followed two weeks later by her beloved nephew. For Barton, the glorious news of war's end in April 1865 was overshadowed by these personal losses. President Lincoln's assassination only deepened her grief.

Nevertheless, Barton soon returned to work, taking up the new crusade of finding missing soldiers. Just prior to his death, Lincoln had given his written approval to an effort she had begun to "search for the missing prisoners of war." The Army had no reliable system for keeping track of war dead, missing, and prisoners, or of notifying their families. More than half of the Union soldiers known to be dead were unidentified, and 190,000 lay in unmarked graves. Barton, now well known for her work on the battlefield, began receiving piles of desperate letters from forlorn family members pleading for information about the lost soldiers. Immediately, she began compiling a list of the missing to be published in newspapers. She encamped at Annapolis, where shiploads of skeletal, diseased-ravaged prisoners were arriving from prisons in the South, to try to connect these men with their families. Over the next two years, she drained her meager savings to run the service. But after some of her friends in Congress petitioned on her behalf, the federal government awarded her fifteen thousand dollars in payment for her missing-soldiers work. Barton later claimed to have answered more than 63,000 letters during this period, and to have located 22,000 soldiers. Included in these numbers were a few Confederate soldiers and nearly 13,000 Union soldiers who had died at Andersonville Prison in southwest Georgia. Barton's work to locate the names and graves of the soldiers at Andersonville put her in close touch with a major Confederate atrocity.²⁹

Barton first learned of the Andersonville prison camp when a twenty-year-old former prisoner named Dorance Atwater contacted her. Two years earlier, Atwater had been captured at Gettysburg, and in early 1864 he had been transferred to Andersonville. There he encountered a reality that Barton later referred to as "hell itself."³⁰ At least thirty thousand prisoners had been confined within twenty-six parched acres of the

²⁹ Pryor, *Professional Angel*, 130-5.

³⁰ Jones, *The American Red Cross*, 16.

stockade, surrounded by boy sentries who shot any prisoner who stepped across or wandered near the deadline around the perimeter. Prisoners had to assemble makeshift tents in the treeless mud or dig caves in the ground. The only source of water within the stockade, a trickling creek that served upstream as a waste dump for a Confederate army camp, was further polluted with the prisoners' refuse and bodily wastes. Prisoners were not allowed out of the stockade to gather water from the fresh, fifteen-foot-wide creek just yards from its boundaries, and many consequently contracted typhoid and dysentery from the polluted water. (Although these events preceded the advent of germ theory, it was widely accepted at the time that sewage-contaminated water made people sick). Food, though abundant in the area surrounding the prison throughout the war, was systematically withheld by the camp's commander to control the prisoners. A commissary store in the camp sold food of varying quantity, including "worm-eaten peas"³¹ and cornmeal. Prisoners who lacked Union greenbacks to buy the food and other necessities were left to starve. No effort was made to restrain criminals among the prisoners from stealing the others' possessions and assaulting them. The stockade's commander, Captain Heinrich Hartmann "Henry" Wirz, used teams of attack dogs to track down any prisoners who tried to escape. He ordered those who misbehaved to be confined in stocks for hours in the blazing sun, hung by their toes, cuffed in a skin-pinching neck iron and attached to chain gangs, or simply shot.

Atwater had survived Andersonville through his perfect penmanship. Assigned to a desk next to Captain Wirz, Atwater was ordered to keep a logbook of the names of prisoners who had died at camp and list the cause of death. When the daily death toll climbed into the hundreds, Atwater became convinced that Confederates would destroy this record at the end of the war, so he secretly made a copy, with coded annotations indicating where prisoners were buried. He kept his register in his coat lining and smuggled it out when he was transferred out of the prison just before war's end. The Confederates did turn over the original list to federal authorities during prisoner exchanges at the end of the war, but many pages were ruined. Atwater's register, which he claimed to have loaned to federal authorities in exchange for three hundred dollars and a government clerkship, was the only complete one, and Barton sought to ensure that it would be used to mark the graves at Andersonville and notify the families of the dead.

When Barton asked the Secretary of War for permission to go to Andersonville, now under Union control, he invited her on a planned military expedition to the site. She took Atwater along. Once they arrived at Andersonville, the expedition's craftsmen and laborers began marking the headstones of dead soldiers, while building fences and paths as part of their project to make it into a national cemetery. Barton walked through the site with Atwater, whose guided tours helped her understand the inhuman conditions that the soldiers had faced—an experience she later conveyed to the congressional Joint Committee on Reconstruction and to audiences around the country during a lecture tour. She also met hundreds of former slaves who came to inquire whether Lincoln's assassination meant they were no longer free—as local whites had told them. Assured by

³¹ Ibid.

Barton that they were still free, they discussed with her the cruelties they had suffered under slavery. One woman showed Barton twelve fresh gashes in her back, the evidence of lashes an overseer had inflicted on her earlier that year while she was pregnant. Barton arranged for the woman and her husband to live and work at a house provided by the Union colonel in charge of Andersonville.

Barton’s experiences at Andersonville caused her to abandon the impartial attitude she had formerly taken toward soldiers’ suffering during the war. While she certainly had not provided equal aid to both sides, Barton had thus far regarded each Confederate soldier as somebody’s son or husband and had found “heart sickening” the sight of these men lying on the battlefield with flesh ripped open by shot and shell. But now, as she surveyed the evidence of the prison’s deliberately abominable conditions and listened to the former slaves’ stories, she lost her compassion for the suffering of white southerners. Later, when called to testify before the Joint Committee on Reconstruction, she indicated that she generally believed the stories of cruelty from the former slaves but that she doubted she “got any truthful expressions from white people.” Despite having traveled through burned-out Atlanta and war-ravaged southern landscapes on her voyage, Barton left the South more “Yankee” than she had entered it.³²

After these experiences, Barton was enlisted to embark on a paid lecture tour of the Eastern United States. She gave speeches in which she dramatically recounted her war stories, to audiences packed with Union veterans and their wives. This tour helped Barton to become a financially independent woman.³³ Together with the national publicity she received for her missing soldiers work, the lectures also made Barton a nationally known figure. While hundreds of women had volunteered selflessly in both Union and Confederate hospitals, and others had traveled with the armies ministering to the troops, Barton’s name soon became emblematic of Northern women’s role in the Civil War. Her long postwar career as the president of the American Red Cross, which she founded in 1881 and led until 1904, only solidified her international reputation as an engaged and sympathetic American humanitarian in war and peace.

Clarissa "Clara" Harlowe Barton

Role in Civil War.	Provided aid, supplies to Union soldiers during battles of Cedar Mountain, Second Bull Run, Chantilly, South Mountain, Antietam, and Fredericksburg, 1862. Mobilized with Union troops in Beaufort, South Carolina, 1863. Aided Massachusetts 54 th in July 1863 assault on Fort Wagner. Army nurse in 1864-65. Established office to locate missing soldiers, 1865-66.
Born	December 25, 1821, North Oxford, Massachusetts
Died	April 12, 1912, Glen Echo, Maryland
Buried	North Cemetery, Oxford, Massachusetts

³² Jones, *American Red Cross*, 16-18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 20.

Father	Captain Stephen Barton, 1774-1862
Mother	Sarah (Stone) Barton, 1783-1851
Career Milestones	1839-1850 Schoolteacher in Oxford and Millbury, Massachusetts 1850-1851 Attended Clinton Liberal Institute, Clinton, NY 1852, Founded the first public school in New Jersey, Bordentown 1854-1857 and 1860 Clerk in U.S. Patent Office, Washington D.C. 1852 New Jersey public school crusader 1862-1865 “Angel of the Battlefield . 1865-1866 Missing Soldiers Office 1866-1868 Lecture tour 1881 Founded the American Red Cross and fought successfully for the American ratification of the Geneva Convention, 1905 Founded National First Aid Association of America.
