

Unitarian Profile - Clara Barton

Clarissa Harlowe "Clara" Barton was born on Christmas, December 25, 1821 in Oxford, Massachusetts. Her parents, Stephen and Sarah Barton, helped to create the first Universalist church in Oxford. Clara developed an early interest in medicine. When she was eleven, her brother David became her first patient after he fell from a rafter in their unfinished barn. Clara stayed by his side for two years, helping to nurse him back to health. At age 15 she began teaching at a school, something that her parents hoped would help with her shyness and uncertainty.

After teaching for a few years, Barton started her own school in North Oxford. She herself went to school at the Liberal Institute in New York, and began teaching in Bordentown, New Jersey. Because she convinced the community that the school should be free, enrolment went from 6 to 600. The community then felt that because the school had so many students it would be best if it was run by a man. Barton resigned shortly after that announcement, after 18 years of teaching.

In 1854 Barton started working as a copyist in the Patent Office in Washington, DC after being appointed to the position by Charles Mason, Commissioner of Patents. She was the first woman in the US to be appointed to such a position. She left Washington DC from 1857 to 1860 because the presidential administration at the time supported slavery, which she was opposed to, but she continued her copyist job by mail. She returned to Washington DC after Abraham Lincoln was elected to the presidency.

In 1861 Barton started an organization to make sure that the soldiers fighting in The Civil War had access to the proper supplies. General William Hammond gave her permission to ride in army ambulances to nurse wounded soldiers. In July 1862 she was given permission to travel right to the battlefields to aid the soldiers. She did not differentiate between Union and Confederate soldiers. All received her assistance.

In 1865 Abraham Lincoln put her in charge of searching for and identifying the missing soldiers. Herself and a soldier named Dorence Atwater managed to identify about one-tenth of the missing soldiers. They were known as the "Angels of Andersonville" for their hard work, and Barton was also called "The Angel of the Battlefield".

When The Civil War was over, Barton gave lectures about her experiences on the battlefield. She became involved in the women's suffrage movement after meeting Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and became an advocate for civil rights after meeting Frederick Douglass.

In 1868 Barton's doctors suggested that she travel to Europe to relieve the stress of her work on the battlefields. While there she became acquainted with the organization International Committee Red Cross. This organization was committed to helping all victims of war no matter what side they were on. When she returned to the US she started to work on establishing an American branch of this organization. Some people didn't think it was necessary because they believed that the US would never have another war on it's own soil. However, Barton proposed that the organization could assist with natural disasters as well as wars. The American Red Cross was founded on May 21, 1881 with Clara Barton as president. She resigned in 1904 at the age of 83 amidst criticism about how she ran the organization.

In 1905 she affirmed her Universalist faith in a letter to an Ohio inquirer. "Your belief that I am a Universalist is as correct as your belief in being one yourself, a belief in which all who are privileged to possess it rejoice." She retired to Glen Echo, Maryland, where she died of pneumonia on Good Friday, April 12, 1912.

~ submitted by Melanie Walters