



**Clara Harlowe Barton (1821-1912)**

## CLARA BARTON

---

Good day. My name is Clara Barton. If you had told my schoolmates in Massachusetts that one day I would be called “The Bravest Woman in America,” they would have laughed. As a child I was painfully shy and afraid of everything. My brother David taught me how to ride horses and be more daring. However, I still would never have believed that I could work as a battlefield nurse, champion women’s rights, and spend seven years campaigning to get America to join the Red Cross. My desire to help others would give me the courage to do all those things.

My parents were Captain Stephen Barton, a prosperous farmer, and Sarah Stone, a woman with the radical notion that women should have the same rights and freedoms as men. I had two sisters and two brothers, all of whom were teachers except my favorite, David. In 1832, when I was ten, David fell from the roof during a barnraising. Doctors told us his case was hopeless, but I refused to give up on him. For two years I washed, fed, medicated, and entertained him. Some people believe this foreshadowed my later work as a Civil War nurse.

My first job, and just about the only one available to women, was as a teacher. I even opened the first free public school in Bordentown, New Jersey in 1852. It was a huge success--so huge that the townsfolk felt a woman couldn’t handle it, even though I already had. When they appointed a male principal to take over my school at twice the salary, I was so upset that I quit teaching forever. I went to Washington, D.C. to visit my sister Sally and liked it there so well I stayed.

Thanks to a Congressman friend of mine, I got a job as a copyist with the United States Patent Office for \$1,400 a year. I was one of the first women to work for the federal government. Many of my co-workers made it plain they didn’t want me there. Some felt it was improper for men and women to be in the same public building!

I would fight the same prejudice against women when the Civil War broke out. I wanted to nurse the wounded soldiers at the battlefield, but officials said that a women wasn’t brave enough or strong enough and would just get in the way. I persisted and they finally let me go, thinking I would quit quickly. I did nothing of the sort. I dodged bullets and enemy soldiers in many battles, facing death countless times in order to tend the poor injured men. One doctor even called me “The Angel of the Battlefield.”

After the war ended, I organized the search for missing soldiers and helped locate over 22,000 of them. I also helped identify 13,000 graves at the infamous Andersonville Prison in Georgia. During a visit to Europe in 1869, I learned about the International Red Cross (IRC), an organization devoted to better treatment for all in times of war. I was so excited! By preparing medical supplies, food, and clothing before a war, many lives could be saved during the war. Home in America, I told Congress and the President that we should join the IRC. They were not interested.

It took seven long years of campaigning, but finally in 1882 the United States signed the Geneva Treaty, and I became the first president of the American Red Cross. I became America's first woman diplomat when I attended the Red Cross Conference in Geneva in 1883. I would lead the Red Cross rescue efforts in sixteen natural disasters and the Spanish-American War. I also founded the National First Aid Society.

Not bad for a formerly terrified little girl who spoke with a lisp! But I only succeeded because I refused to bow to my own fears and society's narrow definition of what women could achieve. I hope you never give up in your own quest for your dreams. I am living proof that they can come true!