



Touched by the Better Angels: Compassion

Part Four of a five-part series

Robert C. Plumb, January 29, 2021

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Clara Barton in 1904 | public domain

Starting in the antebellum period in America and continuing through the Civil War, five women performed extraordinary actions that supported the Union cause. They accomplished these acts amid the chaos and gloom during a period that left little room for anything but suffering and loss. Harriet Tubman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Julia Ward Howe, Clara Barton, and Sarah Josepha Hale boldly made contributions that were manifested in acts of freedom, truth, inspiration, compassion, and reconciliation. And, importantly, their legacies live on today after more than a century and a half. Over the course of a five-part series between now and February, we will be taking a look at each one. Here we present Part Four: Clara Barton: Compassion.



Detail of Clara Barton Monument at Antietam National Battlefield | CC

After a short career as a teacher in Massachusetts and New Jersey, Clara Barton was working as a Patent Office clerk in Washington when the Civil War broke out. The former Massachusetts resident was irate when the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment was involved in a riot while changing trains in Baltimore on April 18, 1861. Southern sympathizers and Union troops clashed, resulting in sixteen persons being killed—twelve civilians and four Union soldiers.

Barton began contacting her Massachusetts and New Jersey friends to obtain supplies to pass on to the Union Army. Simultaneously, she began making contacts among the political leaders from her home state such as U.S. Senator Henry Wilson. Barton became a much-needed source of supplies for the Union Army. Wilson

became a high-level contact that helped her enlist the support of U.S. Army leadership, such as the Army Quartermaster Corps that became her transportation and distribution method.

At first, Barton was satisfied to deliver medical supplies and her personal involvement at locations where the wounded were taken following battles. This was the case following the battles of Manassas and Chantilly, where the wounded were transported to Fairfax Station, Virginia. There Barton and her assistants began helping by delivering supplies, performing rudimentary medical tasks such as making and applying compresses, fashioning slings, using tourniquets, and changing bandages. But as the severity and extent of the wounds became known, Barton quickly saw that she needed to be close to where they were occurring—near or on the battlefield.

In September 1862, learning of Robert E. Lee's planned invasion of Maryland, Barton quickly enlisted the aid of Col. Daniel Rucker of the U.S. Quartermaster Corps to obtain a wagon to transport medical supplies where the Confederate and Union forces would be fighting. Rucker gave her the support she needed and, along with her assistant Cornelius Welles and a teamster and wagon, she was quickly on her way to Western Maryland. On September 16, Barton and her helpers reached Sharpsburg, Maryland, where the Battle of Antietam was unfolding. Over the next 24 hours the bloodiest single-day battle of the Civil War took place. Barton's medical supplies were welcomed by the field surgeons who had been reduced to staunching wounds with corn husks from the nearby cornfields. One of the attending surgeons, Dr. James Dunn, would refer to Clara Barton in a letter to his wife as the "angel of the battlefield." Barton continued to take her medical supplies and nursing expertise to other battlefields. She was present at Fredericksburg, Virginia, in December of 1862; and Fort Wagner, South Carolina, in July 1863.

Following the war, Barton set up a Missing Soldiers Office in Washington, D.C., to account for the thousands of missing Union soldiers, many of whom died in Confederate prisons. Her background in treating casualties, providing medical supplies, and accounting for the missing gave her the necessary expertise in disaster relief to found the American Red Cross.

Robert Plumb is the author of *The Better Angels: Five Women Who Changed Civil War America*.



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