A Study in Leadership: Clara Barton, Before the American Red Cross

William T. Campbell, EdD, MS, RN
School of Nursing, Salisbury University, Salisbury, MD, USA

Clara Barton is recognized and celebrated for being the Founder and the First President of the American Red Cross (ARC). She was not a Registered Nurse by today’s legal definition, but dedicated most of her life to healthcare, nursing, and the alleviation of human suffering. Much of her later life was spent in disaster relief, but there was an earlier life with which most people are not acquainted. Clara displayed leadership throughout her life and well before her role in the ARC.

Clara left her job as a New England teacher and moved to Washington DC to take on a position as a copyist in the U. S. Patent Office; a job routinely held by males only in that Victorian age. Landing that role with the help of her Massachusetts’s congressman was an accomplishment seldom attempted, and rarely realized, by few women. That position, both in government and in location, served her well in the coming years.

At the beginning of the American Civil War, there was a huge demand for hospitals beginning in July 1861 with the first battle of Manassas, located just outside Washington, DC. The demand for hospitals and healthcare was critical in the capital as thousands of wounded arrived, but there were no hospitals or nurses. A temporary hospital was opened on the empty third floor of the U.S. Patent Office and Clara volunteered to be a nurse, working there in the evenings after completing her day job as a copyist below. All this time she was communicating with ladies aid societies back in Massachusetts gathering supplies for the wounded and hospitalized soldiers and shipping them to Clara. Three warehouses full!

Hospital nursing was not sufficient for Clara and in September of 1862 with the battle of Antietam looming to the northwest of Washington, she sought wagons, horses, and drivers to move her gathered supplies to the pending battlefield hospitals. Critical thinking and leadership were used as she secured transportation and passes to arrive at Antietam before most of the Union supplies and medical personal. Clara served as a battlefield nurse for the Union at Antietam and later at many other battlefields. She continued to hold her federal position by employing a man to do her job for half her salary.

At the end of the war she partnered with Dorence Atwater, an ex-POW, to return to Andersonville POW Camp in Georgia where he had helped bury thousands of Union soldiers in unmarked graves. All the time he was keeping a secret list of the deceased. With his help in locating the graves she was able to identify and mark thousands of graves with names and units. The Andersonville National Historic Site with its 13,000 marked graves remains a reminder today of the sacrifice of war and her contributions. Aware that thousands of ex-soldiers were missing she opened the Missing Soldiers Office at 437 7th St., NW, Washington, DC. Her idea was a government funded office to locate missing soldiers or inform families of the location of their remains. She crafted the idea, convinced the federal government to fund it, took her boarding room and
expanded it as an office location, staffed the office, and took sole leadership over the office and staff. Her tireless efforts were able to locate over 22,000 men. Following the war years and the immediate post-war period she was exhausted. She closed the office, locked the door, and walked away. She then took a well-deserved vacation to Europe, discovered the International Red Cross, and decided it would be a good idea to bring back to America. Thus began the next chapter in her life of leadership.

Title:
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References:

Abstract Summary:
Clara Barton is well known as the founder and President of the American Red Cross. However before that she held a Federal Government position previously reserved for men, served as a volunteer Civil War hospital and battlefield nurse, identified thousands of unmarked graves, and opened the Missing Soldiers Office.

Content Outline:
I. Introduction - held a position as a teacher in New England, traditional women's job in pre-Civil War era America
II. Body
A. Federal Position in Patent Office - usually reserved for men
B. Volunteer Hospital Nurse - examples of leadership
C. Volunteer Battlefield Nurse - examples of leadership
D. Identified unmarked graves at Andersonville POW Camp - example of leadership
E. Opened Office of Missing Soldiers - example of leadership
F. Later after all this came her trip to Europe to review the International Red Cross, her return to the US, her fight to create the American Red Cross (ARC), and her position as President of ARC

III. Conclusion - demonstrated extraordinarily leadership skills, critical thinking, and collaboration prior to her work with ARC

First Primary Presenting Author

Primary Presenting Author
William T. Campbell, EdD, MS, RN
Salisbury University
School of Nursing
Professor of Nursing
Salisbury MD
USA

Author Summary: Dr. Campbell is a student of nursing history specializing in the period of the American Civil War. At a past Biennium he co-presented Recognizing Wartime Nurse Heroes. He served on the STTI taskforce to investigate how to best recognize wartime nurse heroes. His extensive research and speaking involves the evolution of nursing during the period of the American Civil War. He recently developed a nursing history course as a film and literature based Honors course.