



The Angel of the Battlefield: Clara Barton and Responsibility

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

Clara Barton developed responsibility from a young age as she understood what it was like to feel helpless and mistreated. She faced constant teasing about a lisp she had when speaking, and lived in a tumultuous home with a mentally unbalanced mother.

Although timid and prone to illness, Barton proved herself to be a very capable young woman. At the age of ten, she helped nurse her severely injured brother, David, for over two years—even after doctors had given up hope on his condition. As Clara grew into womanhood, she was encouraged to become a teacher—a profession in which she excelled. Despite her quiet personality, she proved herself to be capable when teaching large classes of young men and women. Humanitarianism and responsibility were traits that the young Clara Barton would continue to develop throughout her life.

NARRATIVE

Born on December 25, 1821, in New Oxford, Massachusetts, Clara Barton grew up as a very quiet and introspective young girl. She was a very bright but timid young girl who learned quickly and proved to be academically talented. Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, Barton was already breaking boundaries. She worked successfully as an educator and also held a position as a clerk in the Patent Office—the first woman to do so. Of course, Barton experienced harassment from her male co-workers, but this challenged her to work even harder to prove them wrong. Due to the stress caused by her job and how she was treated, Barton's health declined until she eventually became ill with malaria. When James Buchanan was elected president, he eliminated Barton's position in the Patent Office, putting her out of work.

The Civil War provided Barton with a chance to combine her skills in education and empathy and put them toward a higher purpose as a nurse. Working in a field hospital in Washington, D.C. during the early years of the war, she recognized some of her former students among the wounded, a painful experience that pushed her to work even harder at helping the injured. Barton worked diligently to help ease their suffering, as she felt a strong sense of responsibility for the soldiers. She ate what they ate and lived among them. Even though the work was tiring and seemingly unending, Barton forged on in her desire to help others, earning the nickname “Angel of the Battlefield”.

As the Civil War came to an end, President Lincoln put Barton in charge of finding missing soldiers, a task she worked on with the same determination and enthusiasm that she had when helping soldiers on the battlefield. She answered letters by the hundreds and made requests

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to the government on behalf of families, diligently working to overcome the confusion in the federal bureaucracy that came about following the war.

In 1868, Barton traveled to Europe to rest, but within a few years she once again found people in need of her help. There, she saw the affect that the Franco-Prussian War had on civilians. She discovered an organization called the Red Cross, which provided medical aid to soldiers during wartime. She returned home in 1873 and worked ardently to convince her fellow Americans of the organization's merits. Although it took several years, Clara Barton finally accomplished her goal of establishing the American Red Cross in 1881.

Throughout her life, Clara Barton felt a great sense of responsibility to help others. She was a teacher, a nurse, and a humanitarian who dedicated herself to assisting humanity. Her accomplishments made her a celebrity during her time, and they continue to positively impact the world in the modern day.