Narrative

Clara Barton and Responsibility

☐ I can define the virtue of responsibility by examining the story of Clara Barton.

Essential Vocabulary:

| responsibility | Acting on good judgment about what is right or wrong even when it is not popular. Individuals must take care of themselves, their families, and their fellow citizens/others in civil society and a republic and be vigilant to preserve their own liberty and the liberty of others. |
| civil society | The various volunteer organizations and associations that are separate from the government that are dedicated to the well-being of society. |

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In September 1862, Clara Barton led a team of wagons to the battlefield of Antietam. She pushed her team of mules to go through the night to ensure she would arrive in time to be there once the looming fight between Union and Confederate forces began. The Battle of Antietam ended as the single bloodiest day of the Civil War, with thousands killed and tens of thousands wounded. Barton arrived to provide much needed medical assistance to the overwhelmed surgeons caring for the wounded. She earned the nickname, “The Angel of the Battlefield,” for taking responsibility to provide aid and comfort to her fellow citizens during the war so that they could return to their families and homes.

Clara Barton was born on December 25, 1821. From a young age, she felt a strong sense of responsibility to care for those around her. One day, her brother fell in a barn and suffered from an extreme headache for months. Barton watched as doctors treated him and learned their methods. She would almost constantly be at his side to treat him, even after the doctors had nearly given up on him because of their inability to cure him. Later recalling that time in her autobiography, Barton wrote, “I realize now how carefully and apprehensively the whole family watched [me], but I had no idea of it then. I thought my position the most natural thing in the world; I almost forgot that there was an outside to the house.”

At the age of 17, Barton began to teach. Her sense of responsibility for educating her pupils became widely known in the areas around her, and other schools petitioned her to teach at their schoolhouses.
Eventually, Barton began working at the U.S. Patent Office in Washington, D.C. In April 1861, the Civil War began. A group of Massachusetts militia men were traveling south to Washington, D.C. when they were attacked by pro-Confederate citizens in Baltimore. When the wounded were brought to Washington, D.C., Barton believed she had a responsibility to care for the wounded, so she quit her job and volunteered to work in the hospital to provide aid to them. She also solicited citizens to provide food, bedding, and other supplies that were drastically understocked at the hospital. Barton believed that she had a responsibility to create an association with her fellow citizens to work towards a healthy civil society and care for those in their community who needed it the most. She would go on to work at hospitals behind the frontlines for the rest of the year.

In 1862, she was granted permission to work on the frontlines — a job traditionally filled by men. She worked at several battlefields over the course of the war including Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Fort Wagner, where she cared for wounded African American soldiers from the famous 54th Massachusetts regiment, which was the first regiment of African Americans to serve during the Civil War.

During one battle, she was providing comfort and care to a soldier lying wounded on the battlefield when a bullet tore through her sleeve and killed the man. She took her responsibility to alleviate the suffering of those around her seriously and threw every ounce of herself into it. Barton would frequently not sleep in her frenzy to care for the seemingly neverending line of wounded left in the wake of every battle.

After the war, Barton’s work for soldiers wasn’t finished. She received letters from distressed families who knew that Barton had met many soldiers while working as a nurse. These letters inquired about missing sons, husbands, and fathers. The War Department’s system for tracking the wounded, missing and killed during the war was inadequate, so Barton knew that she had to act once again to meet a need in her country. She received permission from President Lincoln to open the Office of Missing Soldiers. In his letter offering his support for Barton’s endeavor, Lincoln wrote, “To the Friends of Missing Persons: Clara Barton has kindly offered to search for the missing prisoners of war. Please address her ...giving her the name, regiment, and company of any missing prisoner.” This office worked to help families find where their loved ones were being treated for wounds or were buried.
In 1869, Barton traveled to Europe to take a break from her work and to recover her health. In Geneva, Switzerland she learned more about the International Red Cross, a humanitarian group dedicated to providing neutral assistance to soldiers on all sides during wartime. She took what she learned back home and founded the American Red Cross, a voluntary organization dedicated to the well-being of humanity as a whole. She eventually added relief for natural disasters to the list of her organization’s work.

Clara Barton’s sense of responsibility towards mankind continued for the rest of her life. Even in her 70s, she worked to provide aid in Cuba to locals and soldiers during the Spanish-American War. The American Red Cross continues to provide aid in numerous ways to Americans and people around the world as a testament to Barton’s legacy. Barton’s life was dedicated to improving people’s lives in times of distress and helping strengthen voluntary organizations for healthy civil societies.

**Analysis Questions**

1. How did Clara Barton earn the nickname “The Angel of the Battlefield”?

2. Barton displayed the virtue of responsibility in multiple events throughout her life. List two of them and explain how she contributed to the well-being of others by doing so.

3. Why do you think voluntary organizations are so important in a healthy civil society?

4. What are some ways that you can exercise the virtue of responsibility in your daily life? How will doing so benefit your family, your community, and yourself?