
Pioneers in Professional Dietetics – Fourteenth in a Series: Clara Barton’s Supplies on the Move with the Union Army

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Volumes have been written about Clara Harlowe Barton (1821-1912) whose work experience ranged from teacher patent office clerk, battlefield supplier, and nurse to finding missing persons after the Civil War, and later in life becoming the president of American Red Cross (1, p 173). This article focuses on her role as expert procurer of food and supplies under extremely dangerous conditions of an army on the move between battles with selected examples of relevance to dietitians who have an interest in health care and feeding in disaster conditions. Her activities, particularly fierce battles with staggering casualties (notably Antietam and Fredericksburg in 1862), demonstrate how her experience and independent spirit combined prove her to be “a one-woman relief agency...” (2, p 70) from Maryland to South Carolina during the Civil War years (3, pp 115-127).

What prepared Barton for this unique role during this dramatic chapter of her life? Born in North Oxford, Massachusetts (3, p 112) on Christmas in 1821, she was 40 at the start of the Civil War (4, p 42). Leading up to this was an impressive resume of experience and qualities:

- Educator at the early age of 17; she taught school in Massachusetts (5); several of her students later enlisted in the 21st Massachusetts Regiment.
- Organization, record-keeping, and business experience working in the US Patent Office from 1854-1857 (3, p 113). Brockett and Vaughan wrote their 1867 report while Barton was still operating the “Bureau of Missing Men” she created after the war; they described her as “remarkably devoted to her work, and her organizing abilities are unsurpassed...” (3, p 132).

- Caregiving experience for her brother and father who even on his deathbed supported his daughter’s call to duty in 1861 (3, pp 117-118; 4, pp 41-42). He was a war veteran and Mason; he appeared to have instilled a sense of patriotism and desire to serve their country (3, p 112).
- Spirit of independence and determination necessary to forge ahead despite forces against women in the workforce and government (1, p 174). Despite pressures against women serving in the war at the time, “...at 40, Clara Barton had long ceased to take orders from anyone...” (6, p 46).
- Nutrition note – Barton notably followed a restricted vegetarian diet “eating meat only when necessity or circumstances required it” and was in the habit of light meals and “protracted fasts” for weight control. Despite digestive issues, she managed to stay healthy and fit (4, p 32).

Supply wagons were moving targets for the opposing forces; Barton knew this. In fact, if she anticipated a battle was imminent, she followed with supplies that she had purchased or collected from donors. In this way, she had provisions in place before, during, and in the aftermath of fighting for thousands of wounded. Barton won an ally in the US Army, Quartermaster Major (later General) Daniel Rucker. Aware of the tragic delay in aid after the first battle of Bull Run (Manassas, VA) in July 1861, she brought much-needed supplies to Washington, DC. With his help, she was soon afforded additional storage space and given passage to drive wagons or take railcars to the frontlines of battle to issue supplies directly (1 pp 169-170; 3, p 116-117; 5). She delivered supplies which served the wounded from Cedar Mountain, Chantilly, Second Bull Run, Fredericksburg (VA), Antietam (Sharpsburg, MD), and later, many locations in the South Carolina Sea Islands.

Behind the lines in a cornfield at Antietam in September of 1862, she combined her own supplies with those she foraged in a farm nearby and directed emergency feeding and nursing care, setting up a makeshift hospital kitchen and providing surgeons with lanterns and candles needed for surgery throughout the night (3 pp 119-120). She was given credit for her service to the 21st Massachusetts Regiment at Antietam: “Our true friend, Miss Clara Barton... was now permanently associated with the regiment, and, with two, four-mule covered wagons, which by her untiring efforts she kept well-supplied with delicacies in the

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way of food and articles of clothing, was a ministering angel to our sick...never sparing herself or failing in her devotion to our suffering men...won the lasting respect and love of our officers and men” (7, pp 213-214).

In the cold winter of December 1862, the Union Army temporarily occupied the city of Fredericksburg, VA. Barton was there “organizing the hospital kitchens; and after the withdrawal of the troops, she established a private kitchen for supplying delicacies to the wounded...cooking was performed in the open air.” She directed that “large fires [be] built and the men wrapped in blankets. An old chimney was torn down, the bricks heated in the fire, and placed around them” to keep them as warm as possible (3, p 123). This was no small feat in the aftermath at Fredericksburg, where thousands of wounded soldiers lay freezing to death on the battlefield (8, pp 148-149).

In July of 1863, Barton was at Morris Island, SC during the siege at Fort Wagner. “Her employment was, with three or four men detailed to assist her, to boil water in the lee of a sand-hill, to wash the wounds of the men...to prepare tea and coffee, and various dishes made from dried fruits, farina, and desiccated milk and eggs...she alone... kept up her fires and preparations...[and]...had anything suitable to offer the wounded and exhausted men” (3, p 126). Earlier that summer, she had an opportunity to visit a hospital at Beaufort where she was introduced to Susie King Taylor and visited African American troops of the 1st Carolina USCT (4, p 155). Taylor was impressed by Barton’s attention to the soldiers and wrote, “...I honored her for her devotion and care for those men” (9, p 67).

While Barton operated independently from established organizations, such as the United States Sanitary Commission, in 1892 she delivered a moving address in the form of a poem she had written, “Women of the Field,” (10, pp 83-86) to recognize unconventional women who gave service to soldiers during the war, risking physical danger and social disapproval. Her poem included over a dozen names of Sanitary Commission women. Several of these have been featured in this Pioneers series, such as Annie Wittenmyer and Mary Livermore.

Further research tips to learn more about Clara Barton: The works cited here by Oates and Massey are worth reading for their extensive and thorough endnotes. These will guide those who wish to research further to primary sources and documents. Another excellent resource is the extensive collection of Clara Barton papers at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC and online

(11). Additionally, readers are encouraged to visit the Clara Barton Missing Soldiers Office Museum (12) – or utilize their online resources in the references below.

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3. Brockett, LP & Vaughan, MC. *Women at War: A Record of Their Patriotic Contributions, Heroism, Toils, and Sacrifices During the Civil War*. Originally published in 1867 by RH Curran, Philadelphia, PA. Reprinted edition published in 1993 by Longmeadow Press, Stamford, CT, pp 111-132
4. Oates, SB. *A Woman of Valor: Clara Barton and the Civil War*. New York: The Free Press (Macmillan), 1994, pp 32, 41-42, 153-155.
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7. Walcott, CF. *History of the Twenty-First Regiment Massachusetts Volunteers*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company: 1882, pp 213-214. <http://www.archive.org/stream/21stregiment00walcrich#page/n7/mode/2up/search/ clara+barton> (Last accessed 6-10-2019).
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9. Taylor, SK. “Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops Late 1st South Carolina Volunteers” (originally published in Boston in 1902 by the author) in *A Black Woman’s Civil War*, edited by PW Romero and WL Rose, Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995, p 67.
10. Barton, C. “The Women Who Went to Field.” Poem composed and read by Barton at the “Farewell Reception and Banquet of the Ladies of the Potomac Corps held at Williard’s Hotel, Washington, DC., on November 18, 1892.” Cited in: MacCaskill, L & Novak, D. *Ladies on the Field. Two Civil War Nurses from Maine on the Battlefields of Virginia*. Livermore, ME: Signal Tree Publications, 1996, pp 83-86.
11. Library of Congress. Collection: Clara Barton Papers. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/clara-barton-papers/about-this-collection/> (Last accessed 6-10-2019).
12. Clara Barton Missing Soldiers Office Museum. Washington, DC. <http://www.clarabartonmuseum.org/emergency/> (Last accessed 6-10-2019).

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