

# Oak Ridge and the Red Cross, Part 1

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | August 21, 2007

As we wrap up the July 6, 1944, troop train wreck, let me say that I have thoroughly enjoyed researching the history of the train wreck. I especially want to give thanks to Bill Sergeant and Scott Chippendale for their encouragement to do the series and their assistance by providing research contacts and materials.

Much of the earlier materials I used, military reports, etc., came from Bill. Scott provided a wealth of materials on the Red Cross and I have saved that information until now. While a good bit of information exists regarding Red Cross involvement in the response to the troop train wreck, there is so much more to their story. I wanted to give it added emphasis by telling that story independently.

My look at the Red Cross involvement in response to the troop train wreck tragedy led me to a better understanding of the history of the Red Cross. I also learned a bit about the history of the Anderson County Red Cross and Oak Ridge Red Cross organizations, now consolidated and known as the American Red Cross – Appalachian Chapter. They serve all of Anderson County, including Oak Ridge, Clinton, Oliver Springs and Lake City.

To learn the history of the Red Cross in Oak Ridge, we must first look at the early years of the American Red Cross. This will help us to better understand how that organization came to be active in Anderson County and Oak Ridge. It will also help us appreciate why the Army Corps of Engineers, when faced with growing humanitarian needs during the Manhattan Project, came to use the Red Cross to address those needs in both the military and civilian population of early Oak Ridge.



American Red Cross founder Clara Barton as she wished to be remembered

It may surprise you to learn just how the system operated in light of the necessary secrecy required to assure Oak Ridge remained a “Secret City” that did not exist on any maps or in correspondence. Some people in Clinton knew quite a bit about Oak Ridge and came here often. Maurine Owen, executive secretary of the Anderson County Red Cross, was one such individual. She made numerous trips through the gates to interview individuals and families who needed the help of the Red Cross for one reason or the other.

So, let's take a look at the origins of the Red Cross organization. As you may know, Clara Barton, a Patent Office clerk, through her simple acts of kindness began a movement that came to be known as the Red Cross. During the Civil War, when the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment stopped in Washington, D.C.,

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after a particularly tough skirmish, she noticed they had lost their supplies. So she cooked food and ripped sheets into towels and handkerchiefs to give the exhausted soldiers.

From this beginning, Barton tirelessly continued to bring comfort to sick and wounded soldiers. She went to the front lines taking food, supplies and medicine to the troops. She captured the imagination of the people who soon dubbed her the "Angel of the Battlefield."

After the war ended, Barton continued to push for services for the military and their families. She worked to help reunite families with their missing soldiers. She continued to work feverishly to help all the military in any way she could until finally, told she needed rest, she traveled to Europe in 1869. Here she found Henry Dunant, a Swiss businessman who had suggested neutral volunteer organizations be used to provide care and treatment to wounded soldiers. The Red Cross Movement was born from Dunant's ideas. Barton determined to begin a Red Cross Movement in the United States.

After years of work, Clara Barton founded the American Association of the Red Cross in 1881. She also pushed hard for the United States to sign the Geneva Convention, an international agreement regarding treatment of soldiers. A year later President Chester A. Arthur did sign the Geneva Convention. Interestingly, the first major activities of the newly formed Red Cross in the United States was not in support of the military but rather were responses to natural disasters. Forest fires and floods were the driving forces that caused the Red Cross to mobilize disaster relief operations that provided food, shelter and medical care to thousands of victims.

One of the most famous responses by the early Red Cross volunteers was to South Carolina's coastal islands, devastated by a terrible hurricane on Aug. 27, 1893. The Gullah people, who were free blacks who had been slaves primarily from the West African rice-growing coast, were the hardest hit. Over 2,000 people died and over 30,000 were made homeless by the 16-foot tidal surge. Nearly every building along the low country coast was damaged beyond repair. This hurricane was one of four that were active on Aug. 22, 1893. It was a horrible hurricane season.

Clara Barton's fledgling Red Cross was stretched to the limit attempting to respond to these natural disasters. She stayed with the Gullah for 10 months before declaring victory because the people were again raising food and had places of shelter.

Without her dedicated help, these people would have had to fend for themselves, as they had been doing since being freed. The plantation owners had virtually abandoned the huge rice plantations. They would not live there because of the disease and the oppressive heat. No relief was provided from the time of the hurricane until the Red Cross went there on Oct. 1, 1893; the plantation owners ignored the Gullah people, the government did not send help.

Barton's Red Cross made a huge difference in the area. They brought food and helped the local Gullah get back on their feet. Even today, the memory of the Red Cross and the help provided the islanddwelling Gullah people can still be seen in their history.

The next major change in the Red Cross was made by Jane Delano, a registered nurse who established the Red Cross Nursing Service in 1909. The nursing service included the Rural Nursing Service that sent nurses into isolated communities that did not have adequate medical care. It also provided 24,000 nurses to the military in support of World War I. Some 15,000 Red Cross nurses assisted with the 1918 influenza epidemic that killed 20 million people worldwide and 675,000 Americans as well as 223 Red Cross nurses. More than 70,000 American Red Cross nurses assisted the military during World War II and still others helped on the home front.

It would have been those helping on the home front who would have been involved in the response to the July 6, 1944 troop train accident at Jellico, Tenn. The Anderson County Red Cross and the Secret City of

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Oak Ridge's Red Cross joined forces to help respond to the wreck that killed 32 military personnel and two L&N Railroad employees, as well as injuring 98 soldiers.

Before leaving the history of the American National Red Cross, it is worthy of note to show that Clara Barton once spent two years in Clinton, New York. In an April 23, 2006, article in The Courier in Clinton, Richard L. Williams, village and town historian, said, "In late 1850, at age 29, Clara enrolled in the female division of the Clinton Liberal Institute, the Universalist school, which started here in 1832 and had a male division at the corner of Utica and Mulberry streets. While Barton was a Baptist in her earlier years, she had become a Universalist, the denomination which founded the Clinton Liberal Institute in 1831."

Williams' article continues, "The then-new female building at 13 Chestnut St. was not quite finished so Barton stayed at the old Clinton House, a typical old-time tavern on West Park Row, conducted by Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Bertram for a brief time. Miss Louisa M. Barker was the principal of the female division. Barton had not expected so charming a teacher, according to reports. Clara never told anyone she had been a teacher, and it's doubtful she told anyone her age (at the time she was 29).

"She took math, languages, and natural sciences and mingled with the CLI girls as well as some male admirers in the community. All-male Hamilton College was one mile away so readers can speculate as to her contacts there. Her costs were \$35 per term for room, board, and tuition. After three terms she left Clinton upon getting news of her mother's death..." So soon was Clinton's interaction with the great lady who started the American Red Cross at an end.

Williams concludes by stating, "Clara Barton was pro-women's rights and anti-slavery; she was exposed early in life to being industrious and hard-working, traits she continued throughout her long life. While shy in her earlier years, she had charismatic charm, a magnetic personality, and was a rational, self-possessed leader, who was American Red Cross founder and its president until 1902. Work was her ticket to the recognition she needed. Barton died April 12, 1912, at the age of 91, ending a remarkable 19th century career when most women usually stayed in the home to tend to children and household chores."

Such individuals as Clara Barton rise up occasionally in our history, and their contributions to others resound throughout history. More hard-working and devoted volunteers like her are needed today. Next we will focus on the Red Cross response to the July 6, 1944 Troop Train Wreck and the early years of the Red Cross in Oak Ridge.