

STORIES of New Jersey

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SCOTCH PLAINS

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CLARA BARTON

On Christmas day 115 years ago there came to the one-story farmhouse of Captain Stephen Barton in Oxford, Mass. a Christmas bundle that was to prove a gift to the whole nation as well as to the Barton family. That bundle was a baby girl named Clarissa Harlowe Barton. Clarissa, youngest child in a family of four brothers and sisters, soon grew into an active, alert, and independent young woman. She soon dropped her unwieldy name and became plain Clara Barton.

Her fame as the founder and first president of the American Red Cross has somewhat overshadowed her earlier achievements as a champion of public schools. The little school which she established in Bordentown, N.J., in the face of prejudice and grudging support, was the first stepping stone in her career.

At 15 Clara fulfilled the requirements for teaching simply by completing the school curriculum. Then she let down her skirts, put up her hair, and began to teach in her home town of Oxford. But the place was too small to hold her long, nor was she satisfied with what she had learned in the little Oxford school. The doors of colleges were closed to women in those days, but this determined young woman found a place in the Liberal Institute at Clinton, New York. In a year she had gotten all that the Institute had to offer.

At 30 she went to Bordentown for a visit. The little town on a bluff by the Delaware River was warm and colorful in contrast to her native New England village. From its early days Bordentown schools had been noteworthy. Here was a field in which Clara Barton felt she could grow and expand. She was given an opportunity to teach in a little private school.

This was before the day of free public schools as they exist today. True, the New Jersey State Legislature had, in 1839, made education compulsory, but there were not sufficient public funds to allow every child to go to school. Consequently only those children whose parents could afford to pay a fee to defray the teacher's salary had the advantage of schooling.

Miss Barton was so disturbed by this condition that she approached Mr. Suydam, chairman of the School Committee. He listened carefully to her idea for a public school, and then proceeded to explain the impossibility of her ideas. The rich would not patronize a "pauper school." The ragamuffins really belonged in a reform school -- anyway, how could a woman expect to control them? -- and since there would be no fees from the pupils there would be no pay for her.

To each of his arguments Clara had a reply. The matter of pay she swept aside by offering to work without remuneration for an experimental period of 3 months if the Committee would furnish quarters.

Mr. Suydam permitted her to state her case to the School Committee. The determined young woman overrode their objections and instilled in them some of her own confidence.

Clara Barton got her school -- a little ramshackle wooden house -- and