



# Biography Clara Barton



A photographic story of a life

Stephen Krensky



# Clara Barton





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## chapter 1

# Rustic Beginnings

On Christmas Day 1821, a new baby was about to join the Barton family. Her expectant mother, Sarah, lay in bed under the care of a helpful cousin. Her soon-to-be father, Stephen, sat quietly by the fire in the next room, tired after finishing his daily chores around their farm. The impending event was not a particular worry. His wife had delivered four other children without incident. Captain Barton saw no reason to think this one would arrive any differently. At such times, it was best simply to stay out of the way. Eventually, he was sent off to get the doctor, but the baby girl was born before they returned.

Clara was born in this farmhouse in Oxford, Massachusetts, where her ancestors had settled.





The birth itself was not a surprise, of course. However, the pregnancy had been an unexpected one. Sally, the next youngest child, was already 10, and the oldest, Dolly, was 17. The Barton family appeared to be complete. At age 38, Sarah presumably had thought she was done having babies.

As for Christmas, nobody in the Bartons' town of Oxford, Massachusetts, or anywhere else in the young United States, made much of a fuss about it. The Puritans, who had first settled nearby Boston in 1630, had actually banned the holiday from 1659 to 1681. Attitudes had lightened up since then, but many people still treated the day as little different from any other. Two years earlier, in 1819, the famous author Washington Irving had published *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, featuring an English squire who hosted a festive gathering on Christmas. It was a novel idea. But the idea of ordinary families and friends doing the same had yet to catch on.

So the baby remained the center of attention. When the time came, she received the imposing name of Clarissa Harlowe Barton. Clarissa Harlowe was one of her aunts. This aunt had been named for the main character in a book by 18th-century author Samuel Richardson. The Clarissa

## Puritans

The Puritans were a group of English protestants that pulled away from the Church of England in the 1600s and 1700s. Many moved away from England, mostly relocating to the Netherlands and New England.



in the book was a wealthy young lady manipulated by both her family and her intended husband. She had met a tragic, though fictional, fate. The Bartons could only hope that their little Clarissa's life would turn out better.

Certainly, the country that she was born into had a promising future. In 1821, the United States stretched from Maine in the north to Florida in the south and westward all the way to the Oregon Territory on the Pacific Ocean. The natural resources of that land, most of it still untapped, were vast and varied. The population, now fast approaching 10 million, was expanding rapidly. Of the 24 states in the union, the latest, Missouri, was squarely anchored at the edge of the frontier on the Mississippi River.

Missouri's entry into the United States had not been a smooth one, though. If one issue threatened the country's security,

The signing of the United States Constitution in 1787 had laid the foundation for the new country and its laws.





Unlike farm laborers, slaves were considered the property of their owners with no rights at all.

it was the question of slavery. At the time of the American Revolution, almost 50 years earlier, the



former British colonies had allowed slavery within their borders. Four years after winning their independence from Great Britain, the newly liberated states adopted a constitution in 1787 to unite them as a single country. But there was one big catch. While the Northern colonies had little ongoing economic need for slaves, the farming communities of the South relied on the labor-intensive crops of tobacco and cotton. For them, slavery was an integral part of society.

So the Constitution made slavery legal. Doing so might seem to mock the phrase “all men are created equal” from the Declaration of Independence, but the Founding Fathers were willing to overlook that point. They knew that without this concession, many of the Southern states would refuse to join the new United States. Besides, the Constitution had included a provision that banned the importation of slaves as of 1809, and it was hoped the problem would fade away on its own after that.

But the country had no such luck. And by 1820, with free states (those banning slavery) rapidly joining the union,



## The Missouri Compromise

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 grew out of the evolving position of slavery in the United States. As of 1808, the importation of slaves was no longer legal, but existing slaves as well as their children could continue to be bought and sold. The Missouri Compromise was an attempt to prevent the regional differences of opinion over slavery from tearing the country apart. It was held in force for a generation, but was never really a satisfactory solution for either side.

the existing slave states got nervous. Soon, they would be hopelessly outnumbered in Congress. At that point they could easily imagine slavery being outlawed. To keep this from happening, they were prepared to vote against allowing any new states at all.

This potential deadlock led to the Missouri Compromise of 1820. It laid out a future in which slavery in the western territories would not be

allowed. But more immediately, it established that free and slave states would enter the union in pairs. Both pro- and antislavery political factions hoped that the issue would now subside, though not everyone was so optimistic. Some, like 77-year-old Thomas Jefferson, feared that the Compromise would someday tear the country apart.

For the moment at least, such large issues had little effect on daily life in Oxford. The small farming and milling community lay 50 miles west of Boston on the way to Connecticut. It had been founded in 1713, and Samuel, the first Barton to settle there, had arrived only three years later.



His grandson Stephen had been a doctor and fought in the Revolutionary War. It was his son, also named Stephen, who had married 21-year-old Sarah Stone in 1804 and eventually became the father of Clarissa.

Clara's parents were prominent citizens in the town. Captain Stephen Barton, as he was known (though he had served in the army as a common soldier) was decidedly old-fashioned. He didn't enjoy wasteful activities like dancing or drinking. As a young man in the 1790s, he had served in the army on the western frontier in Ohio and Michigan. And he always retained his military bearing. He was skilled with his hands and had built his own house, as well as much of the furniture inside it. He farmed his own land, raised horses and took part in local politics. The captain believed in hard work, but he was also charitable toward the poor. One of the founders of the local Universalist Church, he supported education and religious tolerance. His youngest daughter later recalled him as a calm and reasonable man.

The same could not be said of Clarissa's mother. Sarah Barton also came from a military background. Her

The Revolutionary War was a living memory during Clara's childhood, since many older men had served in it.

