Clara Barton was one of America’s greatest heroines — a patriot and philanthropist who, when she saw a need, gave every ounce of her strength to address it.

Clara Barton, a shy farm girl from Massachusetts, harnessed her iron will and devotion to human welfare to accomplish the good works which earned her world fame. Despite life-threatening conditions, she provided supplies and care to troops in the American Civil War and became known as “The Angel of the Battlefield.” Almost single-handedly she founded the American Red Cross, which has provided comfort in times of crisis since 1882. As the Detroit Free Press wrote of Barton shortly after her death in 1912, “She was perhaps the most perfect incarnation of mercy the modern world has known.”

Clara Barton was born on Christmas day in 1821 in Oxford, Massachusetts. Her father, a farmer, had also been a soldier, and his tales of army lore instilled in his daughter a lifelong interest in military affairs.

For two years, beginning when she was 11, Barton nursed her brother David, badly injured in an accident. The lessons she learned during this time were of much use to her later.

At age 15, to overcome her shyness, Barton began a successful 18-year period of teaching. In 1854, she moved to Washington, DC, which she made her permanent home.

Her war service began in April of 1861, with the arrival of the Sixth Massachusetts Regiment. The group had lost its baggage in battle, so Barton set about supplying their needs, tearing up old sheets for towels and handkerchiefs and cooking for the troops.

After the battle of Bull Run, she was struck by reports of woeful shortages of supplies in the field. With characteristic independence, she advertised for provisions in a newspaper and, when the public sent huge amounts, established a distributing agency.

In 1862, she got government permission to accompany the sick transports and aid the ill and the wounded. Barton showed courage, endurance and resourcefulness on the battlefield. To her, each soldier was an individual and merited the best possible treatment.

For four years after the war, Clara Barton supervised a federal search for missing soldiers. She also delivered lectures on her war experiences, which were well received. She met Susan B. Anthony and began a long association with the suffrage movement. She also became acquainted with Frederick Douglass and became an activist for black rights.

In 1869, Barton went to Europe for rest but soon found herself in the midst of the Franco-Prussian conflict. Willing, as always, to help, she worked with the International Red Cross distributing supplies in France and Germany. In 1873, she returned home with the Iron Cross of Merit from the German Emperor.

The United States had not been a party to the Geneva Convention of 1864, which made the International Red Cross possible. Clara Barton saw the need for the Red Cross in America and plunged into the task of creating it. She educated the public through brochures and speeches and paid calls to cabinet heads and congressmen. Her efforts were successful and in 1881 the National Society of the Red Cross was organized. John D. Rockefeller gave money to create a national headquarters in Washington, DC, located one block from the White House.

Clara Barton was named its first president and for the next 23 years directed its relief activities. Ever dedicated to helping others, she went to Cuba with a cargo of supplies in 1898, though she was more than 70 years old. She also spent six weeks on the scene of the Galveston, Texas floods, at age 79. In 1904, at the age of 82, she resigned her post. The remaining years of her life were spent at Glen Echo, Maryland, just outside Washington. She died at the age of 91 in 1912, her body taken back to Oxford for burial.

Clara Barton was one of America’s greatest heroines — a true patriot and philanthropist who, when she saw a practical need, gave every ounce of her strength to address it.

CARING is proud to honor Clara Barton, one of the giants of the nursing profession, during May, which includes National Nurses Week. Among other things, she, like Mother Teresa, was an advocate of bringing nursing care to wherever those in need call home.