

Clara Barton visits Sherborn

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Sherborn — SHERBORN — Clara Barton, the famous humanitarian who provided aid to soldiers during the Civil War and founded the American Red Cross, stopped by the **Sherborn Community Center** last week to speak to residents about her life and accomplishments.

The real Barton, of course, passed away nearly a century ago. It was Harvard-based historian and actor Jessa Piaia who engaged the audience on March 8 with a vivid and authentic character portrayal. Piaia, who also portrays figures such as Amelia Earhart and Susan B. Anthony, took the stage dressed in a black satin dress designed specifically for the performance.

Piaia walked onto the podium with the feminine grace and modesty found only in a bygone era. She asked if the audience needed her to use “this modern contraption,” referring to the microphone. Even with the black electronic device in hand, Piaia had no trouble being Barton. With the help of the community center’s 12-lamp chandelier, elegant ceiling design and Victorian ballroom stage, Barton transported the audience to the 19th century.

“I give without measure until the work is through,” Piaia, as Barton, told the crowd, speaking about how she overcame obstacles of money, gender inequality and the violence of war.

She was glad to be at Sherborn, Barton said, because she lived briefly in the town while working at the Sherborn’s Women’s Reformatory, the only female reformatory in the world at the time. Barton’s appointment to the position of superintendent of the institution was also one of the first of its kind for a woman.

Sherborn has paid tribute Barton’s legacy, naming one of its sacred sites after her. The Brush Hill Cemetery on Perry Street is also called the Clara Barton Cemetery.

Besides having a meaningful connection to the town of Sherborn, Barton was also a genuine Massachusetts woman. Clarissa “Clara” Harlow Barton was born on Christmas Day in 1821 in North Oxford, Mass., the youngest of five children.

“I felt like I had six parents,” Barton said.

It was an insightful comment for Piaia to make — Barton was extremely close to her older brothers, one of whom was confined to the bed in sickness at an early age. After a local family doctor had prescribed leeches for him, the teenage Barton decided to ride a horse bareback into the nearest town, Worcester, for a more adequate treatment. It was the beginning of a lifelong career in humanitarian care and health outreach, she told the audience.

Though hardly any women were on the field during the Civil War, Barton saw a need for hands-on aid. As one of the few women on the frontlines, she was shaken by the images of war. But she never relented.

Once, Barton needed to walk over the carnage of a battlefield.

“I had to wring the blood from my dress before I could step away,” she said.

After the war ended, Barton traveled to Europe, and was inspired by the Swiss-inspired International Red Cross, a volunteer-based organization that provided aid to soldiers and civilians during wartime. What began as a plan for “rest and relaxation,” Barton said, turned into what may be her most important contribution to the world — establishing an American association of the Red Cross in 1881.

A few years later, Barton vision of a more encompassing International Red Cross took the form of the “American amendment,” which allowed the Red Cross to provide aid not only during wartime but during times of peace as well. Red Cross organizations could now be used for natural disaster and epidemics.

“It was indeed my proudest moment,” she said, and members of the Sherborn audience nodded in agreement.

Barton concluded her presentation with a quote that encapsulated her life, and the generation of women that she inspired as a whole — Piaia delivered it with drama and importance.

“We shall serve until there is no need,” she said.

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