

Doctor Julian B. Hubbell (ME# 6782)

Why The Clara Barton National Historic Site Was 60 Years In The Making

By: [Rebecca Sheir](#)



The front parlor of the Clara Barton National Historic Site, which was a little longer in the making than perhaps it should have been.

Visit the [Clara Barton National Historic Site](#) in Glen Echo, Maryland, and you'll see the three-story, 35+ bedroom home of the woman who nursed countless Civil War soldiers, and kick-started the American Red Cross. "The Angel of the Battlefield" also used this house as the organization's headquarters.

The historic house established to honor American Red Cross founder Clara Barton features a large house that was built to resemble a Mississippi riverboat.

The designer of the 38-room Clara Barton House, **Dr. Julian Hubbell**, gave it a long and narrow shape, flanking chimneys at the front, and other features suggestive of a Mississippi riverboat. Originally built in 1891 to store Red Cross supplies, the building was remodeled in 1897 for office and residential use, served as Red Cross headquarters for two decades, and was Ms. Barton's principal residence for the last 15 years of her life.

But here's the thing. Barton died in 1912, at age 90, of double pneumonia. And yet the Clara Barton National Historic Site wasn't officially established until 1975, at which point it became the first national historic site dedicated to the work of an American woman.

So what's with the six-decade delay?

Well, it has to do with a so-called spiritual medium, Clara Barton's so-called spirit, and the man whose dedication to Barton swayed him to fall for an elaborate swindle.

His name was **Doctor Julian Hubbell**. He was the American Red Cross' Chief Field Agent from 1881, when Barton began the organization, to 1904, when she resigned as president.

Barton and Hubbell's rooms were separated by a mere parlor, but National Park Service ranger Susan Finta speculates their relationship wasn't romantic. Hubbell was 26 years younger and idolized Barton. Barton, in turn, viewed Hubbell as a tried-and-true agent and companion. Which is why, before she died, she deeded her house to him.

"And he really looked at himself as the caretaker of Clara Barton's legacy, of Clara Barton's memory," Finta says.

After Barton died, Hubbell helped found The Clara Barton Memorial Association, determined to turn the house in to a museum. But money troubles plagued the group — and Hubbell himself — leading several newspapers to write all about it.

Testimony from Dr. Hubbell

And that's when the con began.

On May 3rd, 1914, two years after Barton died, Hubbell received a visitor: Miss Mabelle Rawson Hirons, of North Oxford, Massachusetts.

"Clara Barton had purchased a summer home in North Oxford, Massachusetts," Finta explains. "That's also where Clara Barton is buried. And the Hirons were neighbors of hers."

Hirons said her father sent her, to see how the Clara Barton Memorial was coming along. Though as Finta points out, thanks to the papers, Hirons already knew well and good, "having read the troubles the Clara Barton Memorial Association was having, having read that Dr. Hubbell was basically being left behind in this quest to see Clara Barton properly honored." But in Hubbell's unwitting view, Finta explains, "Here she is, coming from Clara Barton's place of burial, here she is with family connections and ties to Clara Barton," so in Mabelle Hirons, Hubbell sees an advocate, an ally. Especially after an incident that occurs the night she arrives. Years later — when Hubbell would file a lawsuit against Mabelle Hirons (and we'll get to that kerfuffle in just a moment) — he'd report this incident in court. Part of his testimony reads as follows:

"While we were alone, after these conversations about the memorial, Mrs. Hirons said, 'I see Miss Barton standing over there. Can't you see her?' 'No,' I said, 'I don't.' 'She seems to be trying to speak to you. Wait a minute,' and then began twitchings of the muscles of her arms, body, limbs, growing more and more violent, and then a deep breath, and apparent unconscious state...

Now, before we go on, something you should know. Spiritualism — this belief in using mediums to channel the dead — was big in America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Both Clara Barton and Julian Hubbell were among its followers. And Mabelle Hirons knew it.

"After a little waiting, she began to force whispers. 'Doctor, doctor' — only this was very feeble. 'Listen, I have brought her to help you carry out your memorial plans... She loves the home, as I do, and will work with you heart and soul. She has great powers which you cannot understand now, but will see later. If you are not good to her, she will not stay. If you oppose her you will fail. All those who oppose her suffer.'"

A few days in to Hirons' stay, a similar episode occurred; only this time, Clara Barton's supposed spirit told Hubbell that, yes, a memorial was in the cards, but only if Hubbell put the house in Mabelle Hirons' name.

So, he did.

"We're talking about a man in his late 60s, who had spent over 35 years of his life honoring and cherishing this woman who is now gone," Finta says. "And here comes Miss Hirons saying, 'You know, I can do this for you!' And he believed it."

Righting a wrong

He continued to believe for six whole years, during which time, Finta says, "nothing had been accomplished with the Memorial." And by May 1920, he realized that with Mabelle Hirons around, nothing ever would.

"He overheard a conversation in which she was indicating that she wasn't really interested in Clara Barton, she wasn't interested in the Memorial Association," Finta recounts. "And it began to dawn on him that she had conned him."

So Hubbell sued Hirons to recover the property, prompting her to throw him out with nothing but the clothes on his back.

"And that was devastating," Finta says. "When she first kicks him out he sheltered in the woods here in Glen Echo until some of the local Glen Echo townspeople brought him in."

In the meantime, the house was falling apart. Even with Hubbell around, Mabelle Hirons was filling the bedrooms with boarders and tenants of, how shall we say, questionable reputations. Claiming it would help the cause, she sold off tons of Clara Barton's possessions, many of which, Susan Finta says, are still out there.

"You can go on the online auction sites and there are things that pop up from time to time," she says. "But there are probably things that will never come back to the house."

Still, it could have been worse, had the Maryland Court of Appeals not [decided in favor of Julian Hubbell in 1926](#). The court declared Mabelle Hirons guilty of fraud, "by reason of her pretended messages from Clara Barton."

"He did take the perseverance to see this through, and was restored the property," Finta says. "By 1926, 1927, he's living back in the house again. He will pass away two years later. But in the last two years that he has here, he does take an effort to regain some of the possessions that Miss Hirons had sold off."

At long last, the legacy lives on

And when he wills the house to his nieces, he directs them to continue preserving Clara Barton's legacy. In addition to upgrading the house, one of them uncovers a massive collection of Barton's diaries, letters and photographs, sealed up inside a wall.

"One of the speculations is that during the Hirons years, and because Miss Hirons is getting rid of stuff, and is selling stuff, Dr. Hubbell may have walled up these papers," Finta says. The papers are now at the Library of Congress, as part of the 62,000-plus-item Clara Barton Manuscripts Collection.

The Hubbell nieces eventually sold the house to a friend, who sold it to the newly-formed Friends of Clara Barton, Incorporated. The Friends had it designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965. Ten years later, they deeded it to the National Park Service, as the Clara Barton National Historic Site. “And none of that would have happened if it hadn’t originally been Dr. Hubbell’s goal to see Clara Barton honored, when Clara Barton dies in 1912,” Susan Finta says.

And sure, you had a few twists and turns along the way — not to mention 60-some years — but now, tens of thousands of visitors come to the Clara Barton National Historic Site each year, to continue honoring this woman who touched so many lives.



Julian B. Hubbell—arms crossed



A Quiet Leader

Dr. Julian B. Hubbell, the first
American Red Cross Chief Field Agent



As Clara Barton described the qualities of the ideal American Red Cross field agent, she said: “The ideal field agent should possess: the ability to view a situation broadly without scorning details, an objective mind mellowed by sympathetic understanding, a liking for hard work, willingness to cooperate with others, belief in what the Red Cross stands for, executive talents, but willingness to subordinate his/herself.”

A Life of Service

The qualities Clara Barton saw as ideal define the characteristics of her long time assistant and co-worker Dr. Julian Hubbell, the first American Red Cross chief field agent. She absolutely trusted his abilities and relied upon his dedication to the organization.

In the field, he conducted initial inspections, directed distribution of supplies, and organized the influx of additional relief workers. Dr. Hubbell directed the day-to-day relief operations and was often in complete charge of the field work.

He served the American Red Cross from its inception in 1881 until his resignation in 1904. He was involved in every relief effort during the organization’s first 23 years except one. Yet, his contributions to the American Red Cross are often overshadowed by Clara Barton. This is partly due to the fact that Miss Barton preferred to conduct American Red Cross efforts directly in the field. If Miss Barton was unable to travel directly into a stricken area, Dr. Hubbell was

sent in her place. If she was called away from the field, Dr. Hubbell remained in charge. His field work included: 1884 Mississippi and Ohio River floods; 1885 Texas famine; 1886 Charleston, South Carolina earthquake; 1888 Mount Vernon, Illinois cyclone; 1888 Florida Yellow Fever Epidemic; 1889 Johnstown, Pennsylvania Flood; 1892 Russian famine; 1892 Pomeroy, Iowa cyclone; 1893-94 Sea Islands, South Carolina hurricane relief; 1896 Armenian and Turkish famine; 1898 Cuban Reconcentrado relief; 1898 Spanish-American War; 1899 Cuban civilian post-war recovery; and 1903-04 Butler, Pennsylvania Typhoid Fever Epidemic. Dr. Hubbell represented the American Red Cross at International Conferences of the Red Cross on three occasions.

As Clara Barton built the foundations for the American Red Cross, Dr. Hubbell was an unwavering supporter, a valuable partner in the organization, and an indispensable member of her staff.



Dr. Hubbell's dedication to Clara Barton and the American Red Cross began before the organization was even formed. Originally from Iowa, Julian Bertine Hubbell was born February 5, 1847, in Sabula and later moved with his family to Anamosa. As a young man he learned about Clara Barton from his mother. He read of Miss Barton's Civil War accomplishments and later admitted to her that he had "chosen" her to "be his heroine." In the mid 1870s, he moved to Dansville, New York, and served as a professor of science and later principal at the Dansville, New York Hygienic Seminary. It was during this time that he met Miss Barton, learned of her quest to form a Red Cross Society in America, and pledged his service to her cause.

Miss Barton's reliance on Dr. Hubbell began with the organization's very first relief effort. In 1881, Julian Hubbell was attending the University of Michigan. At Miss Barton's request, he was studying medicine when news of devastating forest fires in Michigan reached Miss Barton in Dansville, New York. Miss Barton diverted Julian Hubbell from his studies, and he reported to the "burnt district." The following was reported in *The Red Cross in Peace and War*, "...Professor J. B. Hubbell, was on the burnt fields of Michigan with instructions to examine into the condition of the people and report their necessities to the society from actual observation. These duties were faithfully and judiciously performed..."

Julian Hubbell returned to his schooling but was called away again during the 1882 flooding of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. During his six weeks in the field, Red Cross chapters were organized in New Orleans, Vicksburg, Natchez, and Memphis. Miss Barton summarized Julian Hubbell's accomplishments as "...quick, short, sharp work and yet the most brilliant and successful field work the Red Cross has approved. We are constantly gaining, both in usefulness and appreciation." He returned to the field for the Ohio River floods in the spring of 1883. During this effort, Red Cross chapters were organized in Louisville, Cincinnati,

and St. Louis. Miss Barton wrote, "Again our field agent was dispatched and did excellent work. The entire country was aroused and so liberal were the contributions to the various committees of relief that when Dr. Hubbell retired from the field, having completed the work, he had still unexplained funds in hand. But they were soon needed. In less than a month occurred the fearful cyclone of Louisiana and Mississippi..." Julian Hubbell assisted with the cyclone relief in May and following his return to Michigan, he received his degree as a doctor of medicine on June 28 1883.

During the 1892 Russian famine Miss Barton remained in America coordinating donations and shipments of supplies. Dr. Hubbell was sent from the International Conference of the Red Cross in Rome to Riga, Russia where he met the relief ship S.S. Tynehead. Dr. Hubbell organized the distribution of supplies and arranged transportation throughout the stricken areas by railcars and caravans. He traveled deep into remote regions by river. He coordinated the efforts of the American Red Cross with the Russian Red Cross and worked with Count Leo Tolstoi. Under Dr. Hubbell's direction, American aid, which amounted to 117,000 bushels of shelled corn, 11,033 bags of flour and meal, and additional amounts of wheat, rye, bacon, canned goods and medicine reached famine affected regions over a distance of 3,000 miles from the port at Riga. Clara Barton sent American aid to Russia, but it was Dr. Hubbell who distributed the aid to the Russian people.

Dr. Hubbell's service as an American Red Cross field agent began without formal procedure or ceremony. He dutifully put aside his affairs to answer the call of Clara Barton and the American Red Cross. Through his actions he defined the role of an American Red Cross field agent. Dr. Hubbell was so steadfastly loyal to Clara Barton that when she resigned from the American Red Cross in 1904 he resigned too. He continued to assist with her later work and stayed by her side until her death in 1912. After Miss Barton's death, he was committed to perpetuating the memory of her accomplishments and preserving the mementos of her life without calling attention to his own achievements. Julian Hubbell passed away in the Glen Echo home on November 19, 1929. An associate wrote of him: "Next to the great Clara Barton his record of achievements entitles him to a full measure of praise and honor and a long bright page in history and a secure niche in the Halls of Fame."