

## **Clara's Story**

By Cindy Cooper

Clara Barton has a connection to Charlton education. Growing up in neighboring Oxford, as the youngest of five children, her siblings taught her everything from reading and writing to horsemanship before she started her formal education. At the age of four she started to attend regular school. For one year, she went to a private school in Oxford, to help her overcome extreme shyness, even boarding with the schoolmaster. That program was not successful, even though she was academically talented, so she returned to public school the next year. Her interest in learning wasn't confined to the classroom. Barton recounted a time when she received a geography and atlas book that fascinated her so much that she couldn't sleep. When she was older, a family friend recommended she start teaching as a method to overcome her shyness. She passed an oral exam given by the Oxford school board, and was hired to teach in Oxford's District 9 in 1839.

The March 1841 minutes of Charlton's District 3 show they hired Clarissa (Clara) Barton to keep school, beginning in April and lasting four months, with three weeks vacation. School records show that she received about \$27. At that time, each ward provided their own schoolhouse, and the tax money for schools was divided among the wards in proportion to the taxes paid by each, effectively meaning the residents of the wards paid for their own schools. In each district, the teachers and students took care of the building. Residents arranged for open roads to the schools and enough firewood for the winter. The Prudential Committee, which determined the school year, hired teachers, set salaries, and purchased instructional materials, was also responsible for having the school visited by one member of the committee at the beginning and middle of each term, and having two members present at the closing examination. Schools included all grades and subjects, for children ages 8 to 14, and teachers worked out their own discipline method. In the early to mid 1800s, women were usually allowed to teach during summer sessions, but men were the master teachers for winter sessions in most schools in the state.

The fifty pupils Clara taught learned by rote memorization and recitation. The students had a reputation for being unruly, lead by a student who did not respond to her attempts to bring order. One day, when the most disruptive boy was interrupting the class, she used a whip to bring him to his knees until he apologized. She did not have any more disruptions in the school after that episode. (However, it must also have made an impression on her, since she wrote in The Story of My Childhood over sixty years later about not being able to "efface" that event). She was hired to continue as a master teacher the following winter term.

She went on to teach in other area schools before moving to New Jersey, where she started Bordentown's first public school. She retired from teaching school at age thirty-two. She later worked to initiate the American Red Cross.

Charlton Historical Society is pleased to host a presentation titled "Clara Barton, Founder of the Red Cross" as part of our annual meeting. Cathy Woods, of the Clara Barton Birthplace Museum, will be the guest speaker. She explained the focus of her program: "In this anniversary year for the American Red Cross, it is interesting to hear about the relief efforts of the organization she founded in 1881. Strange: photos from the 1900 hurricane at Galveston, TX are not much different from photos taken in Louisiana and Mississippi last autumn."