

# The American Red Cross

by  
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Few American institutions have come to symbolize the the characteristic generosity and concern of the American people than the American Red Cross. Over a century old, the American Red Cross has become a fundamental part of our society. Today, we're most familiar with the role the Red Cross plays in disaster relief, but a review of its history demonstrates a multi-faceted network of services.

In October 1863, The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement was created in Geneva, Switzerland, to provide nonpartisan care to the wounded and sick in times of war, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of Henry Dunant. The Red Cross emblem was adopted at this first international conference as a symbol of neutrality and was to be used by national relief societies.

In August 1864, the First Geneva Convention Treaty was signed by twelve countries, recognizing, in part, the role of the International Red Cross. The founding of the American Red Cross in 1881 was due to the devotion and dedication of Clara Barton. Today, the organization's actions, guided by its dedication to humanity and a desire to promote "mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples," follows the fundamental principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, voluntary service, and universality.



Following the First World War, the American Red Cross faced new challenges. Public support and the number of volunteers for the organization decreased, but the great demand for services continued. A reorganization was necessary if the Red Cross was to survive. Starting in 1921, under its new chairman Judge John Barton Payne, the Red Cross showed that it could survive and be strong without war, and without reliance on emergency work to justify its existence. Payne believed that if the Red Cross was to endure and prosper, it must satisfy social demands not met by other agencies. Staff and volunteers worked together to achieve Payne's vision, and the Red Cross regained its former popularity. Between 1923 and 1939, the Red Cross responded to calls for help from victims of floods, drought, and the Great Depression, as it commenced preparation to provide assistance to the victims of yet another world war.

As the Second World War began, the doors of Red Cross chapters throughout the country were thrown open to thousands of new volunteers who wanted an outlet for their frustration over Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. The Red Cross quickly expanded its services to the armed forces, recruiting nurses on behalf of the military, as well as more social workers and recreation specialists to ease the discomfort of civilians being drafted. Following the war, The Red Cross helped Americans adjust to normalcy; however, a war of a different nature was now erupting as the Cold War Era began. According to a 1946 Gallup poll, the Red Cross was viewed as being indispensable. Between 1940 and 1948, the American Red Cross successfully met the challenges of war and peace as it established a blood program, brought an end to the discriminatory policies in hiring and blood donations, and changed its internal structure to democratize the organization.

The 1960s and 1970s were marked by rapid social and technological change. The Civil Rights Movement, labor disputes, chronic unemployment, and the Vietnam War marked some of the divisions within American society. As new technologies emerged, the Red Cross relied increasingly on radio communications, computers, and satellites. The new technology also forced the Red Cross to solve problems caused by man-made calamities, such as chemical plant accidents, oil spills, and the first nuclear accident at Three-Mile Island. Red Cross chapters provided assistance to veterans returning from Vietnam, as well as tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees, the elderly, mentally ill, and other forgotten segments of society. In spite of the continued role of the Red Cross in numerous activities, however, two Harris polls in 1973 and 1976 revealed that few Americans understood the vital part that the organization played.

As the American Red Cross entered its second century of service, it continued its tradition of providing relief to victims of both natural and man-made disasters. One hundred years had passed since Clara Barton had carried in her purse the funds to conduct the tiny Red Cross operations. The organization had greatly expanded since 1881. Yet, the millions of relief workers in the 1980s and 1990s were motivated by the same concern for human life and well-being as the relief workers who had provided aid during the first American Red Cross relief efforts. An early 1990s national survey by Yankelovich Partners showed that the American Red Cross was the most highly regarded of major U.S. charities, and Money magazine named the Red Cross one of the ten best-managed charities in the country.

As our society continues to become larger and more complex, and correspondingly less personal, the need for the American Red Cross continues to grow. In addition to annual natural disasters, we will apparently always be faced with such tragedies as the Centennial Olympic Park and TWA Flight 800 bombings. And when faced with such emergencies, we're always thankful the American Red Cross is there. Knowing all of this, I believe, enhances the collector's perception of what his covers actually represent, and there are certainly Red Cross covers in existence. Most of those shown here are from World War II and perhaps symbolize best of all just what the American Red Cross has come to stand for.

*[Information courtesy of the American Red Cross]*