

## History of American Sign Language (ASL) by Michael J Bennett

American Sign Language has a rich beginning. Men of love developed the education of the deaf.

Juan Bonet, a Spaniard, invented hand, mouth, and body signs, and alphabet for the deaf mute in the year 1620. The Mayflower pilgrims sailed that year from England.

Bonet was secretary to the Constable of Castile. Bonet watched the training of Luis, the constable's deaf son. Bonet took over Luis' education. To make Luis understand words and speak them he created finger signs and mouth movements. Bonet's system of signs and alphabet influences signed languages, such as Spanish, French and American Sign Language.

140 years later, in France, Charles-Michel de l'Épée, founded the first public school for the deaf in 1760.

Épée was a wealthy religious man and lawyer.

By chance, passing through the slums of Paris he noticed two poor deaf sisters using hand signing.

This inspired Épée to teach and to minister to the deaf with his own money. He invented 'the art of restoring the deaf and speechless to society and religion'.

At his Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets à Paris, Épée proposed, "the education of deaf mutes must teach them through the eye what other people acquire through the ear".

L'Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris is now the school's name...

...In the early 1800s, Emperor Napoleon ruled France. During this period, Laurent Clerc was a 12-year-old deaf student under Abbé Sicard.

Sicard headed the Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets à Paris that Épée founded.

Laurent would become an important founder of deaf education in the United States. Clerc said about himself, "I was endowed with considerable intelligence, but nevertheless I had no idea of intellectual things. I had it is true, a mind, but it did not think; I had a heart, but it did not feel."

Laurent Clerc became a teacher at the Institution in Paris.

He gave lectures and demonstrated sign language in England.

An American minister, Thomas H Gallaudet, attended one of the lectures.

Gallaudet was a friend of Mason Cogswell whose nine-year-old daughter, Alice, was deaf. They took an interest in deaf education. Gallaudet traveled to Europe to learn about teaching techniques for the deaf.

Gallaudet visited Clerc and Sicard at their Institute in Paris.

Gallaudet asked Clerc to come to Connecticut to help him create a school for deaf Americans.

In 1817, Alice Cogswell became the first of seven students at the Connecticut Asylum at Hartford for the Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons. The American School for the Deaf is now the school's name.

Clerc's and Gallaudet's students and teachers founded more than thirty schools across America during their lifetime...

...Amos Kendall, Postmaster General, and Edward Gallaudet (Thomas' son) founded the Columbia (D.C.) Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind in 1856.

In 1864, during the American Civil War, President Lincoln signed a bill for the school to become the first college for the deaf. Gallaudet University is the college's name now.

President Grant signed the first three college graduates' diplomas. All Gallaudet graduates' sheepskins are signed by the sitting President of the United States.

The pioneers of quality education to learn sign language for the deaf: Bonet, Épée, Sicard, Clerc, the Gallaudets, and Kendell, helped enrich humanity.

Seventy American colleges and universities have deaf education teacher programs. Millions of family, friends and citizens learn sign language to communicate.

The End