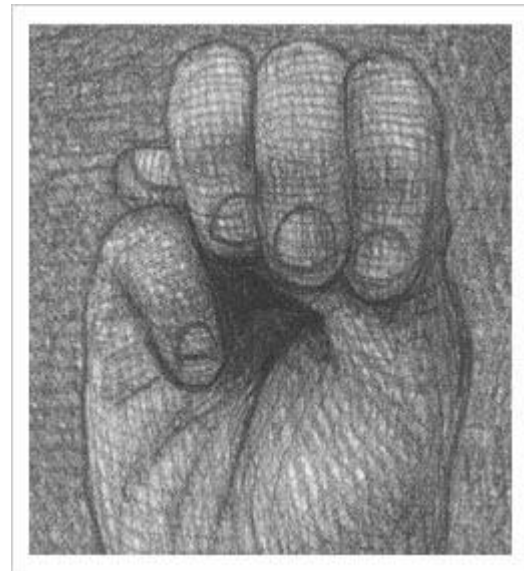


Students,

I have put together a great amount of information for you to read below. This information will be very useful in learning ASL and knowing the history of the language. As I have explained many times, if you started reading a book at chapter 6, the book will not make much sense to you. For that reason, learning the language history is the beginning of your journey. Please read this information. I recommend you to download and print this information and to use this as a reference on this great journey in such an amazing language!

The History of Deaf Culture and Sign Language

by Carol Padden and Tom Humphries.



American Sign Language, or **ASL**, is one of the most widely used sign languages in the world. There are an estimated 200- to 300,000 signers of ASL in the United States and Canada and many more who have learned it as a second language. ASL is not universal, meaning that it is not understood by signers of other sign languages around the world. No one knows how many different sign languages there are; a recent survey of all documented human languages lists 130 sign languages, which include Brazilian Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, Portuguese Sign Language, French Canadian Sign Language, among others.

Where spoken languages use the voice and movement of the mouth to communicate, signers use their hands and their face and bodies to convey precise meaning. One handshape is like one consonant; the English words bat, rat, cat all differ only with the first consonant. Likewise, the signs BLACK and SUMMER are almost identical except for a different handshape.

Fingerspelling is not the same as signing, but it is a useful way to include English words. In the same way that speakers of English borrow Spanish or French words for names and places, signers use fingerspelling when they want to represent an English word such as someone's name or to identify a place. Signers might say "my name is...." and then they fingerspell their name, letter by letter.

ASL traces its history to 1814 when the first school for deaf children was founded in Hartford, Connecticut. ASL was created partly from French Sign Language which is even older, having its origins in Paris sometime around 1790. This means that ASL is likely about 300 or more years old. But fingerspelling is even older. There are charts showing fingerspelled handshapes in books published as early as 1620. These books describe how Spanish monks used fingerspelling to teach their deaf students to read and write.

Every sign language exists in a community of signers with a long history. ASL's history parallels that of schools for deaf children in the United States and Canada. Today deaf children attend different types of schools, not only special schools for deaf children but public schools as well, along with hearing children. Maybe you have seen deaf students in your school with a sign language interpreter? Today, ASL is taught in high schools, in colleges and universities.

Deaf communities are made up of deaf people and ASL signers (who may be hearing) and they can sometimes be very large and active communities. In some places, the deaf community has a long history of social and cultural activity including clubs, sports, theater in sign, and services to support the needs of Deaf people. Indeed, there may be a whole other world of deaf people for you to discover in your own community. You can see deaf actors on television, on the web and especially on YouTube where deaf people post videos in ASL. You can find old stories reflecting the history of deaf people and their culture on DVDs or on the web. In many of the same places, you can find modern adaptations of ASL in the form of poetry, narratives, and creative use of signing. Like all human languages, ASL is alive and always changing to meet the needs of communicating in the modern world. Whether language is in speech or sign, human beings seem to have a powerful ability to find ways to communicate and to identify closely with their language. Think about how valuable your language is to you. This is how deaf people feel about ASL.

The values, behaviors, and traditions of Deaf culture include:

- Promoting an environment that supports vision as the primary sense used for communication at school, in the home, and in the community, as vision offers individuals who are deaf access to information about the world and the independence to drive, travel, work, and participate in every aspect of society.
- Valuing children who are deaf as the future of deaf people and Deaf culture. Deaf culture therefore encourages the use of ASL, in addition to any other communication modalities the child may have.
- Support for bilingual ASL/English education of children who are deaf so they are competent in both languages.
- Inclusion of specific rules of behavior in communication in addition to the conventional rules of turn taking. For example, consistent eye contact and visual attention during a conversation is expected. In addition, a person using sign language has the floor during a conversation until he or she provides a visual indicator (pause, facial expression, etc.) that he or she is finished.
- Perpetuation of Deaf culture through a variety of traditions, including films, folklore, literature, athletics, poetry, celebrations, clubs, organizations, theaters, and school reunions. Deaf culture also includes some of its own "music" and poetry as well as dance.
- Inclusion of unique strategies for gaining a person's attention, such as:

- gently tapping a person on the shoulder if he or she is not within the line of sight,
- waving if the person is within the line of sight, or
- flicking a light switch a few times to gain the attention of a group of people in a room.

The actual HISTORY of ASL in the USA and Canada goes into depth below. It all started with the interest of a priest named Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. Gallaudet had a neighbor with a deaf daughter named "ALICE". Gallaudet was very interested in learning a language to teach Alice about God and therefor traveled abroad to learn the different methods of teaching the deaf. Please read below of the interesting journey he made in establishing a school in the USA for the deaf!

Laurent Clerc: Apostle to the Deaf People of the New World

Written by Loida R. Canlas



The Abbe Charles-Michel De L'Epee, the "Father of the Deaf." founded the Institut National des Jeune Sourds-Muets, Clerc's very first school.

Louis Laurent Marie Clerc was born into an important family on December 26, 1785 in La Balme-les-Grottes, in southeastern France. From the 15th century, the males in the Clerc family had served the king through the office of Tubelion or the Royal Commissary. His father, Joseph Francois, was the royal civil attorney, justice of the peace, and from 1780 to 1814 was mayor of their village. His mother's father was a magistrate in another town. Thus, his family knew and practiced law.

When he was about a year old, Clerc fell from his high chair into the kitchen fireplace. His right cheek was severely burned, a fever developed, and later, it was discovered that his senses of hearing and smell were damaged. It was never clear if this resulted from his accident or if he was born with those disabilities. His name-sign derives from the scar that remained - the middle and index fingers brushed downward across the right cheek near the mouth. His parents tried many different treatments to restore his hearing, but none succeeded. For the next 11 years he stayed at home,

exploring the village and taking care of their cows, turkeys, and horses. He did not go to school and did not learn to write. Thus, as a deaf child, Clerc had neither an education nor a systematic mode of communication.

Young Laurent Enters School

When he was twelve years old, his uncle-godfather after whom he was named, Laurent Clerc, enrolled him in the Institut National des Jeune Sourds-Muets. This institution was the first public school for the deaf in the world, established by the priest Abbe De L'Epee, known as the "father of the deaf." It became the model for hundreds of other schools that were to be established later. The school was directed by the Abbe Roch-Ambroise Sicard.

His first teacher, who later became his mentor and lifelong friend, was Jean Massieu, 25 years old and deaflike him. At the time, Abbe Sicard was in prison, expected to be put to death for sympathizing with the deposed King Louis XVI. Massieu led the school's deaf students, including Clerc, to petition the court for the release of Sicard. Because of this action, Sicard was released.



Jean Massieu, Clerc's first teacher who became his mentor and lifelong friend

A Life-Changing Experience



Clerc, as a young student in Paris

Clerc excelled in his academic studies. However, an assistant teacher, the Abbe Margaron tried teaching him to pronounce words. Clerc's difficulties in pronouncing certain syllables so infuriated this teacher that one time, he gave Clerc a violent blow under his chin. This caused Clerc to accidentally bite his tongue so badly that he swore never again to learn to speak. Later, this experience would strengthen his belief that signing is the method of communication by which deaf students can best learn.

He learned to draw and to compose in the printing office of the Institution. In 1805, just eight years later, he was chosen to become a "tutor on trial." The following year, he was hired as a teacher. His salary was about \$200.

When Napoleon returned to Paris in March, 1815, Sicard decided that he should leave. He visited England and brought with him Massieu and Clerc. In London, they lectured and demonstrated their teaching methods. One of their lectures on July 10 was attended by the Yankee Congregationalist minister, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, from Hartford, Connecticut.

How Gallaudet Met Clerc

Gallaudet was a neighbor of Mason Fitch Cogswell. Cogswell had taken interest in deaf education due to the deafness of his daughter, Alice, and the fact that there were no schools for the deaf in the United States at that time. As his neighbor and friend, Gallaudet became equally concerned for this cause. The two men gathered support from their friends, wealthy members of their community, and the city fathers. In due time, Gallaudet was sent by their supporters to travel in Europe to learn about teaching methods for the deaf.

Earlier, Cogswell had loaned a treatise to Gallaudet - the *Theorie des Signes*, written by Sicard. Now, in London, Gallaudet was introduced by a member of Parliament to Sicard himself. Sicard, in turn, introduced Gallaudet to Clerc. Clerc and the others invited Gallaudet to visit and attend daily classes in their Institution in Paris. He gladly accepted the invitation.

In 1816, Clerc had become Sicard's chief assistant, and he was teaching the highest class in the Institution. In addition to his classes with Sicard, Massieu, and Clerc, Gallaudet was also given private lessons by Clerc. Gallaudet was so impressed by Clerc that he invited this "master teacher" to go to America and help him establish a school for the deaf there.

After much discussion, the Abbe Sicard gave his permission for Clerc to leave. However, he convinced Clerc's mother that he "could not spare [Clerc]." Clerc's mother tried to dissuade him. Clerc had been offered a teaching position in Russia. However, he declined due to financial problems. Now came Gallaudet's offer. He was only 28 years old. He knew that if he went, he might never be able to see his family again. He also knew that the work involved would be enormous. But he was greatly motivated by his empathy for Alice and other deaf Americans who lacked language and were receiving no education. He was also adventurous and was intrigued by the prospect of living in a country that was not Catholic. In spite of his mother's objections, Clerc decided to go. However, Gallaudet had to sign a contract with Sicard, stating that Clerc was "on loan" only for three years in the States.

Clerc Heads to America

Clerc and Gallaudet left for America on board the ship *Mary Augusta* on June 18, 1816. The voyage lasted fifty-two days. Clerc used that time to teach Gallaudet "the method of the signs for abstract ideas." In return, he received tutoring in the English language from Gallaudet (Clerc already had a "considerable skill" in writing in English, as evidenced by his writing his journal



Gallaudet University Archives

The Rev. Thomas Hopkins
Gallaudet

entirely in English during this voyage). He also brought with him a French-English dictionary which was written by Massieu and published in 1808.

They arrived in Hartford on August 22., 1816. That same day, he met Alice Cogswell and communicated with her through sign associations. He found her to be a very intelligent girl who was hungry for knowledge but "virtually without a language." Clerc became more resolved to carry out the mission that he came to do.

Clerc, with Gallaudet as his interpreter, and sometimes accompanied by Dr. Cogswell, delivered many speeches and demonstrations of their teaching methods to get public, legislative, and financial support for their goals. From October 1816 to April 1817, they went to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and other places. They informed the public, interviewed parents of deaf children, communicated with prospective students. They raised around \$12,000 from the public. In a great show of support, the Connecticut General Assembly made history by voting an additional \$5,000 for the school - the first appropriation ever for the education of handicapped people.

The First School for the Deaf in America

On April 15, 1817, rented rooms made up their school which opened with seven students - Alice Cogswell being the first to enroll. It was originally called the Connecticut Asylum at Hartford for the Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons (now the American School for the Deaf). Gallaudet was the principal, and Clerc was the head teacher. A year later, poor and uneducated students filled the school. They ranged from 10 to 51 years of age.

In January, 1818, Clerc went to Washington, D.C. to gather support from Congress. He sat next to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Hon. Henry Clay, and was well-received by the members of Congress.

Later, at the White House, he was introduced to President Monroe by the French Ambassador, Mr. Hyde de Neuville. He was applauded for his work by the President, who had attended one of Sicard's demonstrations in London with Clerc and Massieu.

On May 28, 1818, through Gallaudet's reading of his speech, Clerc addressed the Connecticut Legislature, becoming the first deaf person to ever do so. In the 1819-1820 session, with the help of Mr. Clay, the congressmen from Connecticut sponsored a bill granting the school with 23,000 acres of government land in the state of Alabama. President Monroe easily sanctioned the act. That land was sold for around \$300,000. The proceeds were used to construct school buildings at the Asylum and start an endowment from which income could be drawn for the school.

The American Asylum at Hartford for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb (1821), is now the American School for the Deaf.



Gallaudet University Archives

The custom designed coin-silver pitcher and tray presented to Clerc by the Deaf people of Connecticut in 1850 (Thomas Gallaudet was also presented a similar gift.)



Gallaudet University Archives

Details on the silver pitcher presented to Clerc. The engraving reads: - *as a token of grateful respect by the Deaf mutes of New England. Lover of his kind who left France in the year 1816 to promote the education & welfare of strangers*

who like himself were denied the gift of speech.

On May 3, 1819, Clerc was married to Eliza Crocker Boardman, one of their earliest pupils from Whiteborough, New York . The wedding was held at the house of Eliza's uncle, Benjamin Prescott, Esq. The Rev. Mr. Butler officiated at the wedding. A year later, the first of their six children Elizabeth Victoria, was born. Clerc visited France in 1820. He went again In 1835, taking his son, Francis, with him. His last visit to his homeland was in 1846, with his son, Charles.

Clerc's Influence

While Clerc primarily taught grade-school students, he also trained future teachers and administrators - hearing or deaf. Many of their students went on to become productive deaf citizens and educated deaf leaders, spreading Clerc's teachings and making him the greatest influence in the establishment of new deaf schools in the States at that time. His invitations were not limited to teaching. For example, he was invited to be the acting principal of the Pennsylvania Institution in Philadelphia from August 1821 to March 1822.

Clerc's students and trained teachers founded other schools around the nation or taught in them, using Clerc's teaching methods. The first school modeled after the Hartford institution was established in New York; the second, in Philadelphia. Other schools were to follow in many states around the Union such as in Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee, Virginia, and Quebec in Canada. In all, more than thirty residential schools were established all over the nation during Clerc's lifetime.

Clerc went on to complete 50 years of teaching (41 of those in the States), retiring in 1858, when he was 73 years old. Although retired, he continued his advocacy for deaf education, maintaining an active interest in the school, and appearing as a guest or speaker at many academic functions. In June 1864, with much difficulty due to his age of 79, Clerc came to Washington, D.C. He was the guest of honor at the inauguration of the National Deaf-Mute College, now Gallaudet University.

He never attended college, but several honorary degrees were bestowed upon him for his pioneering work in deaf education.

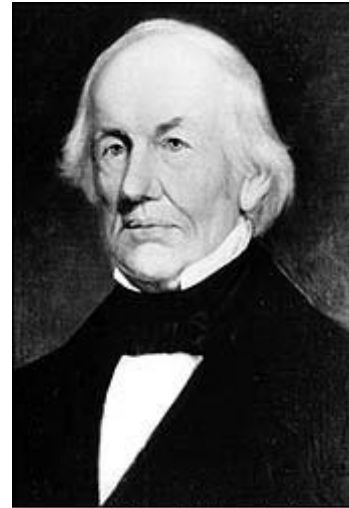
On July 18, 1869, Clerc passed away. He was 83 years old.

Clerc and his wife, Elizabeth, are buried at Spring Grove Cemetery in Hartford. In 1992, a deaf man, Alan Barwielek, visited the Clerc gravesites. He was appalled at the deteriorated and vandalized headstones and started a nationwide campaign to restore the headstones. His efforts drew great support from countless individuals and organizations, including the Laurent Clerc Cultural Fund of the Gallaudet University Alumni Association. Six years later, honor was brought back to the Clerc with the unveiling of new headstones at their final resting place.

Clerc and the American Sign Language

Clerc's mode of instruction was French signs. His students learned those signs for their studies. However, for their own use, they also borrowed or altered some of those signs and blended them with their own native sign language. As the Hartford students and teachers widely spread Clerc's teachings in his original and in their modified signs, deaf communication acquired an identifiable form.

This evolved into the American Sign Language, used in education and assimilated into the personal lives of America's deaf population and its culture. Consequently, about two-thirds of today's ASL signs have French origins. Examples of words that mean the same and have the same signs in American and French are: wine = vin; hundred = cent; look for = chercher.



Gallaudet University Archives

Louis Laurent Marie Clerc, from a painting by John Carlin, a noted deaf artist and Clerc's friend.