

THE BEGINNINGS OF DEAF EDUCATION

By

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There are many histories of Deaf education. It depends on who is telling the story. The story we are telling is a basic history from historians, documentation, and family. It, however, is just a glimmer of the history which actually must have occurred. Most historians agree that the true beginning of teaching children who are Deaf began in the sixteenth century in Spain. At that time Spain was one of the most powerful countries in the world and perhaps one of the wealthiest. Spain was governed by many laws that were based on old Roman laws (Justinian Code). The Justinian Code made the distinction of pre-lingual and post-lingual deafness. Those who had lost their hearing after they had learned to speak and write could maintain all of their privileges of citizenship. Those who were born Deaf and could not speak or write had to have guardians and could not make wills or create estates (Scouten, 8).

Often, wealthy families maintained their wealth by intermarriage. It was not uncommon for cousins to marry cousins thus keeping the wealth of a family intact. One example of this practice in Spain in the 1500's was the Velasco family. The family de Velasco had two Deaf sons and several Deaf daughters. With the two Deaf sons unable to create estates or to write wills, the family wealth would more than likely fall into the hands of curators, guardians, or the government. The family turned to Ponce de Leon who had gained a reputation for teaching a Deaf boy to read and write. With the help of the Velasco family, Ponce de Leon started the first school for the Deaf with at least the two Velasco boys and probably some of the sisters as students. Both boys, Pedro and Francisco, were successful in learning to read and write and also learned to speak (Scouten, 16). Although we cannot be for sure whether Ponce de Leon used sign language or fingerspelling, it would have been natural for him to have done so because the Benedictine monks themselves had used a system of signs and fingerspelling when taking vows of silence.

Around 1610, the Velasco family once again had a Deaf child to educate. Having heard the stories of how the granduncles, Pedro and Francisco, had been educated, the family secretary, Juan Pablo Bonet, began a search for a teacher for young Luis de Velasco. The family found Ramirez de Carrion, a teacher of articulation who also served as a tutor and secretary for a Deaf man, the Marquis de Prego (Scouten, 19). Prego was willing to help out the Velasco family by allowing Carrion to teach Luis for a period of three years at which time he would return to the Maquis.

Bonet observed Carrion teach Luis for three years. After Carrion's tenure had expired, Bonet became Luis's teacher. Luis was very successful and became a favorite in King Phillip IV's court. Because of his outgoing personality and charm, many dignitaries from other countries wrote stories about Luis which inspired teachers in their countries to start schools for children who were Deaf. Bonet published a book in 1620 which contained the old Spanish alphabet that is a forerunner of the alphabet used today in the United States for fingerspelling.

The story of Luis de Velasco's education reached England where it was instrumental in stirring some of England's sharpest thinkers into action regarding the issue of deafness (Scouten, 25). Several teachers in England had great success in teaching Deaf children. Thomas Braidwood, 1715-1806, of Scotland was probably the most successful in that he cornered the market for schools for the Deaf in Great Britain. He kept his teaching methods secret and he swore his teachers to secrecy. Several of his family members were head administrators at the Braidwood monopoly of schools. Several American children who were deaf attended the oral Braidwood schools because there were no schools for the Deaf in America at that time.

Another teacher who was influenced by Bonet's book was the Abbe de l'Epee of Paris. The Abbe de l'Epee used Bonet's Spanish alphabet to fingerspell words to his pupils. What really set the Abbe de l'Epee apart from other teachers of the Deaf at that time was that he used the signs that the students were using to communicate with them. He learned their language and then changed the order to fit the French language for instruction. He began a school in his home and took in students, those who could afford to pay and those who could not. His signs flourished throughout France (Scouten, p.70).

The successor to Abbe de l'Epee was the Abbe Roch-Ambroise Sicard. He accepted the directorship in 1790 of the national Institute for the Deaf. He brought his gifted Deaf student, Jean Massieu, with him to become head assistant teacher. When they arrived in Paris they found conditions destitute, so the Abbe Sicard immediately went to work to obtain funding that had been promised earlier to de l'Epee (Easterbrooks and Baker, 6). Because of Sicard's connections to the aristocracy in attempts to raise money, he was imprisoned during the French Revolution for a short time until some of his former students convinced the new government to release him. During the "100 Days" sojourn when Napoleon entered Paris, Sicard decided that, at age 73, he did not need the excitement of anymore close encounters with the military. He took two of his best Deaf teachers, Jean Massieu and Laurent Clerc, who had both been his former students with him to London.

Meanwhile, in America, the first school for Deaf children was established but was short lived. Colonel William Bolling of Virginia, who was a hearing brother of two Deaf siblings who had gone to the Braidwood School in Edinburgh, did not want to send his two Deaf children to Scotland. He heard that John Braidwood was in America trying to start a Braidwood School. Braidwood was imprisoned in New York for bad debts. Bolling paid him out of debt and financed a school in Virginia in 1815 with five students in attendance. Braidwood was not dependable and the school only lasted a few years.

At about the same time that Bolling was trying to establish the first school for the Deaf in America, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was setting sail to England to learn to become a teacher of the Deaf. He

became interested in educating children who were Deaf through his interactions with his neighbor's daughter, Alice Cogswell. Alice's father, Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell, in seeking some way to help his daughter, became interested in the Deaf in general. He obtained the help of his friends, prominent men of Hartford, and they decided to attempt to establish a school to instruct the Deaf of their country. Because there was no one who could teach the Deaf, they decided to send Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet to England to determine their method of instruction. Gallaudet had very great difficulty learning anything from the Braidwood family; their school was operated for profit and they were reluctant to divulge their methods. He could take a three-year course of instruction at the school, but Gallaudet did not have the time or the money. He had heard about the lecture given by the three Frenchmen, Sicard, Massieu, and Clerc, and that was why he was in the audience that day (Golladay, 4).

To earn money while in London, Sicard, Massieu, and Clerc gave public demonstrations twice a week which were attended by members of parliament, royalty, and the Duchess of Wellington (Barnard, 108). Members of the audience asked questions which Sicard interpreted in sign language to Massieu and Clerc. The men wrote their answers on a blackboard (Eastman, 2). When Napoleon had been defeated at Waterloo, Sicard knew he could return to Paris. At the last lecture the three men gave before leaving London, they were introduced to an American by the name of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet.

Gallaudet was invited to visit the school in Paris and he did so in the spring of 1816. He attended classes, starting with the lowest, and observed the methods of teaching. Eventually he progressed to the highest class which Clerc was teaching. He also prevailed upon Clerc to give him private sign language lessons, and the two men met three times a week for that purpose. Gallaudet was very eager to learn sign language as quickly as possible in order to return to America and report to Dr. Cogswell. Clerc writes that he told Gallaudet that it would take six months to get a good understanding of sign language and a year before he knew enough about the method of instruction to be able to teach the Deaf (Barnard, 108). Gallaudet knew he could not stay that long so he asked Clerc to find him two well-educated Deaf men who knew English to come with him to America. When Clerc did so, Gallaudet changed his mind and said that he wanted Clerc to accompany him, even though Clerc did not know English. (Eastman, 2)

Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc arrived in New York on August 9, 1816 after a journey of 52 day on the ship Mary Augusta. During the voyage, Clerc and Gallaudet discussed how to teach the Deaf, and continued the sign language lessons. Gallaudet also taught Clerc to read and write English by having him keep a journal. Because paper was scarce, Clerc first wrote on a clay tablet borrowed from a crew member; when corrections had been made, he then wrote his final copy on paper. Here is one of the interesting entries:

Wednesday, June the 26th. I talked a little with M. Wilder...about marriage. He asked me if I should like to marry a deaf and dumb lady, handsome, young, virtuous, pious, and amiable. I answered him that it would give me so much pleasure, but that a deaf and dumb gentleman and a lady suffering the same misfortune could not be companions for each other, and that

consequently a lady endowed with the sense of hearing and with the gift of speech was and ought to be preferable and indispensable to a deaf and dumb person. (Clerc,)

For the first seven months after arriving in America, Clerc and Gallaudet traveled throughout New England and the Mid-Atlantic States soliciting funds to start the school. The American Asylum for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb opened in Hartford, Connecticut on April 15, 1817 with seven students, among them Alice Cogswell and Eliza Crocker Boardman, the young lady who would become Clerc's wife.

Contrary to what Clerc told M. Wilder about marriage to a Deaf woman, Clerc followed his heart and married Eliza on May 3, 1819. They had six children, all of whom could hear, and four of whom lived to adulthood. Their oldest daughter, Elizabeth, became a teacher at the school.

In all, Laurent Clerc taught at the Hartford school for 41 years. At first he not only instructed the students but he also taught the teachers. No one knew the method of instruction or the psychology of the Deaf child like Clerc did, so to him fell the task of doing virtually everything for awhile. Some of the early heads of schools for the Deaf in other states were taught by Clerc, including Abraham Stansbury (New York), The Rev. A. B. Hutton (Pennsylvania), H. N. Hubbell (Ohio), Roland McDonald (Quebec, Canada), Joseph Dennis Tyler (Virginia), John Adamson Jacobs (Kentucky), J. S. Brown (Indiana), and Isaac Lewis Peet (also New York) (Golladay, 5).

Laurent Clerc died on July 18, 1869 at the age of 84. In 1874, a monument was placed on the grounds of the school that Gallaudet and Clerc had started. The inscription reads: "Laurent Clerc, the apostle of the Deaf Mutes of the New World. Erected by the Deaf-Mutes of America to the memory of their benefactor, the pupil of Sicard, the associate of Gallaudet, who left his native land to elevate them by his teaching and encourage them by his example."

Clerc is perhaps the most important figure in the history of American Sign Language (ASL). Because of his 41 years of teaching, his instruction of staff, and his influence on the administration of most of the early state Schools for the Deaf. ASL, a blend of French Sign Language and American signs used by students, became a standardized language used throughout America.

From 1817 until 1867, most children who were Deaf attended state schools that had been heavily influenced by the work of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc. In 1867, however, the first "oral" school was established in Northampton, the Clarke Institute for Deaf-Mutes. Shortly after the establishment of Clarke, A.G. Bell and other oral educators had a great influence on the education of children who were Deaf. During the Milan Convention of the International Congress of the Deaf in 1880, an overwhelming majority of members voted to approve the resolution that stated the "oral method should be preferred to that of signs in the education and instruction of deaf-mutes." Only in 2010 was the resolution rejected and an apology was issued by the International Congress of the Deaf.

Today, most children who are Deaf are educated in public schools. State Schools for the Deaf, however, continue to be a viable option for students who are Deaf. By their very nature of being special schools,

State Schools for the Deaf are often able to offer more opportunities to their students who are Deaf than public schools offer.

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