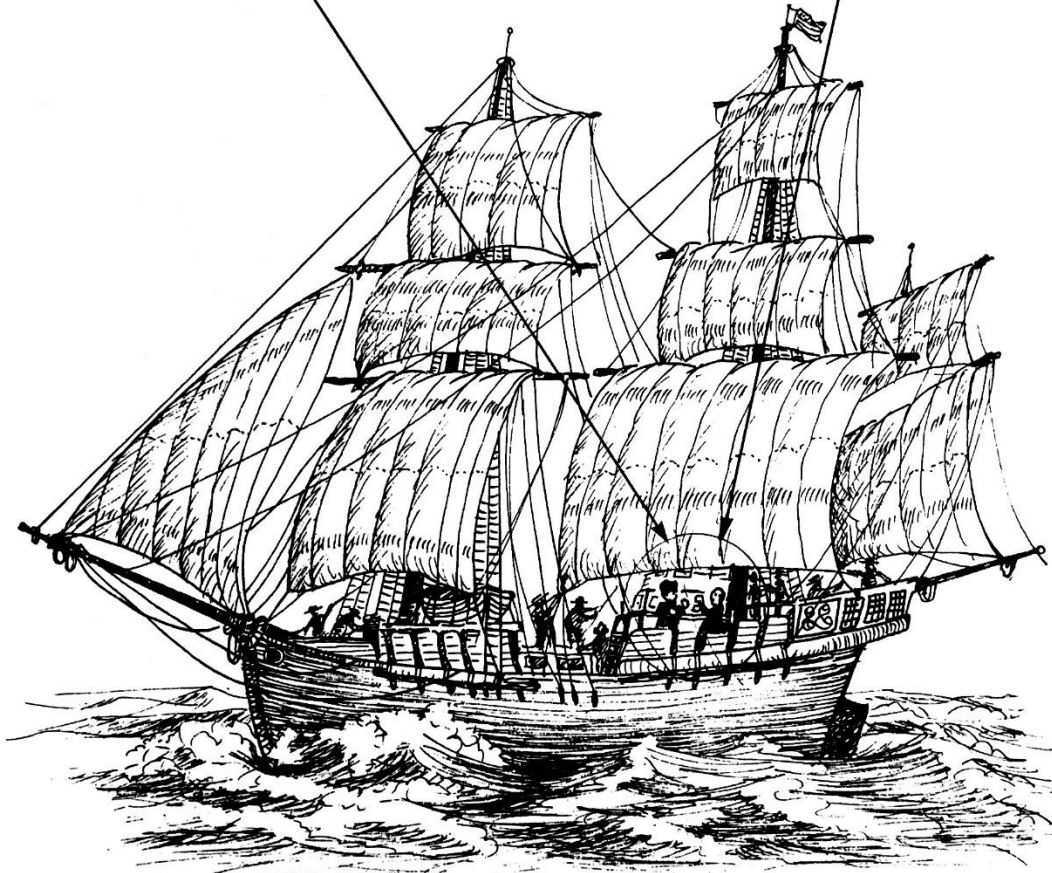


Thomas H. Gallaudet

Laurent Clerc



Mary Augusta
JUNE 18–AUGUST 9, 1816

Laurent Clerc and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet

The Beginning

Laurent Clerc was born to hearing parents on December 26, 1785, in LaBalme, France, a small village near Lyon. Clerc was a year old when he fell into an open fireplace and the right side of his face was badly burned. This accident appears to have caused the loss of two of his senses — hearing and smell. It also caused a permanent scar on his right cheek. This became the origin of his “name sign” (a sign language nickname) — the index and middle finger brushing the right cheek, near the mouth. On December 10, 1787, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet was born in Philadelphia. As he neared adulthood, he decided to become a minister. It is quite possible that he had never before met a deaf person when, as a young adult, he went to Hartford, Connecticut, to visit his parents in 1814. They then lived next door to a nine-year-old deaf girl named Alice Cogswell, the third daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Mason Fitch Cogswell. Alice, who was born in Hartford on August 31, 1805, became deaf at two years old as a result of an illness known as spotted fever.

As a result of his association with deaf people, Gallaudet was also to gain a name sign. It reflected the glasses he wore. To make it, the thumb and forefinger of one hand are placed below and above the side of the eye respectively, and then the hand is moved towards the ear while the two fingers are brought together. Gallaudet Goes to Europe
Gallaudet noticed that Alice did not participate in the outdoor play of the other children. He became interested in her and wanted to teach her. Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell, Alice’s father, was impressed with Gallaudet’s early efforts in this direction. He also saw the need for a school for deaf children. Gallaudet was invited to browse in Dr. Cogswell’s library for information on teaching methods in books that Dr. Cogswell had sent for from Europe. Such information was helpful, but Dr. Cogswell felt that teaching methods should be first observed and evaluated before a decision was made as to which one or ones to emulate. So, with the help of funds raised by Dr. Cogswell and his wealthy friends, Gallaudet left America for Europe on May 25, 1815, on a ship named the Mexico.

Gallaudet Meets Clerc

Gallaudet arrived in Liverpool, England on Sunday, June 25, 1815, and stayed for a week before departing for London, arriving on July 5th. Three days later on July 8th, he met Laurent Clerc for the first time. Clerc was with a deaf colleague, Jean Massieu. Both were respected teachers at the school for the deaf in Paris. The school’s director, the Abbé Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard, who was hearing, was also there. They had been giving lectures in England about deaf education using sign language. The schools for the deaf in England, which Gallaudet had so far visited focused on the development of speech skills and speech reading. Instruction at the Paris school, in contrast, encouraged the use of sign language, using it as the medium of instruction. Gallaudet was interested in knowing

more. He had already studied the sign language method of educating deaf people from Sicard's own book which was in Dr. Cogswell's library.

A New Hope for Gallaudet

The July 8 meeting with the French educators provided hope and a positive alternative for Gallaudet when, over time, his negotiations with the English schools proved unsatisfactory to his mission. The French educators had encouraged him to come to the Paris school and begin private instruction in the techniques of deaf education using sign language. They had also generously given Gallaudet a ticket providing free access to their remaining lectures in London.

Gallaudet in Paris

On Tuesday, March 5, 1816, Gallaudet left London for Paris and arrived in Paris on Saturday, March 9th. He began the private instruction, but was not able to stay the year that he learned it would take for him to become well-qualified to teach deaf students. As an alternative, Gallaudet invited Clerc to come to America with him. Clerc, in a decision that changed history and with Sicard's permission, agreed to go. Clerc signed a contract with Gallaudet on June 13, 1816.

Across the Atlantic Ocean

On June 18, 1816, Clerc and Gallaudet set sail for New York from Le Havre on the northern coast of France on a ship named the *Mary Augusta*. There were only six passengers: Clerc, another Frenchman, Gallaudet, and three other Americans. In addition to the passengers, there was a crew of twelve men and the ship's captain. The voyage across the Atlantic Ocean took fifty-two days. During the journey, Clerc studied English with Gallaudet, and instructed Gallaudet in sign language. They also discussed plans to establish a school for the deaf in America and how they should approach the government and the public to raise the needed funds.

They arrived in New York on August 9, 1816. In America Clerc and Gallaudet stayed for ten days in New York City visiting with Gallaudet's parents, other family, and acquaintances. During his time there, Clerc experienced some culture shock. He admired Broadway, thinking it seemed the finest street in the world. He noticed that people seemed to be always in a hurry, and tended to walk quickly. The streets and buildings, though, seemed to look alike and there was nothing that a European like himself would regard as magnificent. He noticed that Americans tended to find their happiness at the fireside with their spouses, children, and friends, which wasn't necessarily the case in France.

Onward to Hartford!

They then left for New Haven, Connecticut, as Gallaudet wanted to introduce Clerc to the president and professors of Yale College (now Yale University). They enjoyed the day visiting the college, especially the library and the chapel, before leaving for Hartford.

Clerc and Gallaudet arrived at the Cogswell's home on August 22, 1816; just nine days before Alice's 1 birthday, but neither Alice nor her father were at home. Mrs. Cogswell and her other daughters made arrangements for Alice to be sent for from school. Alice and her sisters had been attending the same private school where Lydia Huntley (afterwards well known as the poetess Lydia Huntley Sigourney) was a teacher.

Clerc Signs to Alice

When Alice appeared, Clerc felt the silence in the room. All eyes were on them. Clerc realized that Alice was just a little girl, not a symbol. As he began to say "Hello" in sign, Alice laughed and signed back, "Deaf you-me-same." Clerc understood. Alice then asked if he could teach her many signs and if so what signs would he teach her first. Now it was Clerc's turn to laugh and he said to her, "I will teach you the sign for love." Many months later, Alice told him that at the time when she first met him, she thought she had never seen such beautiful signs before. "MY-HEART GLOW," she signed.

First Meetings

On the next day, August 23, 1816, Clerc and Gallaudet attended a meeting of the directors of the Asylum at the State House in Hartford. A week later, on September 3rd, they and Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell set out for Boston, Massachusetts to solicit the support of the government and the public regarding the future education of the deaf. Standing adjacent to the King's Chapel burying ground, on September 9, 1816, Clerc gave his first public lecture in America. He was pleased with the audience of respectable inhabitants of Boston, but on the next day at the new court house, he was disappointed that only women were present. It was not thought, at the time, that women could help establish a school. However, this courthouse lecture was published in the newspapers. Following this, Clerc and Gallaudet, sometimes with Dr. Cogswell, traveled to New Haven, New York City, Albany, Philadelphia, Burlington (in New Jersey), and other towns, soliciting legislative support and donations through their exhibitions and lectures. They also interviewed deaf prospective students and parents of deaf children.

April 15, 1817

While Gallaudet was still in Europe, his supporters and the friends of the deaf in Hartford were not idle. On May 1816, they secured an act of incorporation from the Legislature of Connecticut for founding a school for the deaf. A sum of \$12,000 dollars was also raised through public donations. In October, 1816, the Legislature of Connecticut, through the vote of the Connecticut General Assembly, granted \$5,000 to the future school. This made history. The American School for the Deaf (ASD), as the school would become known, was thus the first special education institution in American history to receive a government grant

Eventually, the town of Hartford seemed to be the most convenient place to found the school, and was consequently chosen as the site of the first permanent American school for the deaf. It opened in the southern part of the City Hotel building on April 15, 1817 with seven students; one of whom was, naturally, Alice. Gallaudet became the school

principal and Clerc a teacher. In this role, Clerc was also the first deaf teacher in America. The highlight of the first year of the school was a visit of the U.S. president, James Monroe, in the summer of 1817, as part of a goodwill tour through New England. Washington, D.C.

In January of 1818, Clerc visited the City of Washington (now Washington, D.C.) to determine whether they could obtain something from the U.S. Congress for the school. Henry Hudson, a Hartford business man and influential member of the ASD Board of Trustees, accompanied Clerc to Washington, D.C. in place of Gallaudet, who was apparently in ill-health at the time. Hudson acted as an interpreter for both Clerc and hearing people whenever needed, but Clerc often preferred to communicate through writing.

Clerc visited the House of Representatives, and the Hon. Henry Clay, who was the speaker, politely offered him a seat beside him. During the half-hour recess, Clerc conversed with several members of Congress, both in English and in French. He also visited the Senate chamber. On the next day, he had the honor of meeting U.S. President James Monroe at the White House.

During the session of 1819-20, thanks in large part to Connecticut senators and representatives, U.S. Congress granted the school a township of wild land in the South -- some 23,000 acres. It took over two decades to consolidate ASD's claims to the land and sell it off to realize its cash value of approximately \$300,000. This fund helped ASD expand with additional buildings and staff.

Marriage and Honor

Clerc married his former student, Eliza Crocker Boardman, on May 3, 1819. They had six children (all hearing); four of whom survived. Gallaudet married a former student, Sophia Fowler, on August 29, 1821, and raised eight children (all hearing) to adulthood.

Clerc continued teaching at ASD until he retired on June 30, 1858 — except during a nine-month period (November 1821 - July 1822) when he served as principal of the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf. Gallaudet continued as ASD principal until October 1830, when he retired. During their long and dedicated careers, Clerc and Gallaudet recruited and trained Yale graduates as ASD teachers. Many of them, together with ASD alumni, helped establish deaf schools in other states; some of them became principal, teacher, or monitor at these schools.

After his retirement, Gallaudet maintained strong ties with the school. He remained a member of the Board of Trustees, and took an active interest in the school's affairs to the end of his life.

On September 26, 1850, 33 years after the school opened, 200 students and 200 alumni under the leadership of Thomas Brown of Henniker, New Hampshire, gathered to honor Clerc and Gallaudet — two benefactors to whom they were deeply grateful. Each was presented with an impressive silver pitcher and plate set. This was the first large deaf gathering ever held in America.

On September 10, 1851, a year after the first deaf gathering in their honor, Gallaudet died in Hartford at the age of 63. On July 18, 1869, 18 years after Gallaudet's death, Clerc passed away in Hartford at the age of 83.

Sources

BOOKS

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- Lane, Harlan. **When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf**, Random House, 1984

BOOKLET

Laurent Clerc: Bicentennial Celebration (1785-1985)

This souvenir copy was prepared by the Laurent Clerc Bicentennial Anniversary Committee of the Triennial Reunion of the Gallaudet College Alumni Association for the Exhibit at the Edward C. Merrill Learning Center on June 20, 1985: Gilbert C. Eastman, Chairperson, Francis C. Higgins, Michael J. Olson and Carl N. Schroeder served on the committee.

VIDEOS

- Laurent Clerc** DeBee Communications <http://www.debee.com/> Video review by Chris Wixtrom. <http://www.aslaccess.org/1clerc.htm>
- Schools for the Deaf** DeBee Communications <http://www.debee.com/>.

WEB SITES

Organizations

- American School for the Deaf, Hartford, Connecticut
www.asd-1817.org/history/index.html
- Gallaudet University / Library / Deaf-Related Resources, Washington, DC
<http://library.gallaudet.edu/dr/>
- Rochester Institute of Technology/ National Technical Institution for the Deaf / Wallace Library / Deaf Librarian's Main Page, Rochester, New York
<http://wally.rit.edu/booksandmore/ntid.html>

Key name

- Clerc—Gallaudet Week.
<http://www.irish-cream.com/Clerc-Gallaudet/html>.

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The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. A Chinese proverb