

Name: _____

The History of ASL

Instructions: Read the article on the “History of American Sign Language” and mark whether each statement below is true or false according to the article.

If a statement is false, correct it in the space below the statement so that it becomes true.

T/F Statement

- 1 American Sign Language is not an actual language but is just a way to help deaf people understand English. (Paragraph 1)
- 2 American Sign Language is universal and used all over the world (Paragraph 2)
- 3 Martha’s Vineyard is an island, not a vineyard. (Paragraph 3)
- 4 Alice Cogswell was deaf. (Paragraph 5)
- 5 The Braidwood family taught Thomas Gallaudet sign language. (Paragraph 5)
- 6 Laurent Clerc was hearing and Thomas Gallaudet was deaf. (Paragraphs 5 &6)
- 7 Gallaudet went with Clerc from England to France. (Paragraph 6)
- 8 Clerc and Gallaudet taught each other some French Sign Language and English on the boat ride from Europe to the United States. (Paragraph 7)
- 9 Clerc and Gallaudet founded the first successful school for the deaf in the United States in 1817 in California. (Paragraph 7)

- 10 Unlike English, ASL does not vary slightly from one region to another. (Paragraph 8)
- 11 About 60% of modern ASL can be traced back to LSF (Langues des Signes Francais) (Paragraph 9)
- 12 Gallaudet University's first deaf president was Dr. Elizabeth Zinser. (Paragraph 10)
- 13 The 1880 International Congress on the Education for the Deaf in Milan, Italy promoted the use of sign language. (Paragraph 11)
- 14 The NAD was so afraid of a total ban on sign language that they made films showing sign language for future generations to see. (Paragraph 11)
- 15 ASL is just a "crutch" to support people with broken ears. (Paragraph 13)

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History of American Sign Language

"Where Did ASL Come From?" by Bryan Eldredge, Utah Valley University instructor

The Beginnings

As the Deaf Community struggles to be understood, it must overthrow many commonly held misconceptions. One of the most widespread, and consequently hardest to overcome, is that "sign language" is an artificial system developed to help deaf people understand English by another means, much like Braille is to blind people. But American Sign Language (ASL) is nothing of the sort. One of the best ways to understand ASL is to understand its history. **1**

The name American Sign Language implies a couple of things: that there are other sign languages, and that the one used in the United States is somehow indigenous to this country. Both of these implications are correct. In fact ASL began to form in small ways not long after the first settlers arrived in America. Some of those settlers carried genes for deafness with them when they came. In addition to those born here, some of the **2**

people who immigrated here were deaf. Many of them brought sign languages native to their homelands, and many of those born here undoubtedly developed what are known as home signs, a rudimentary set of signs which varied widely from place to place and family to family.



In some areas these sign languages or sign systems grew quite popular. Martha's Vineyard, a small island off the coast of Massachusetts, was an example of such a place. Because the people on the island were quite isolated and consequently often married close relatives, a gene for deafness affected nearly one-fourth of the people on the island. As a result almost everyone on the island signed. Community and church proceedings were conducted in sign. Hearing people often used sign language when communicating between themselves

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even when there were no deaf people present. Many of the older people on the island still sign to this day, and many of them have trouble remembering which of their old friends were deaf and which were hearing, because everyone signed.

Gallaudet & Clerc



Situations like that on Martha's Vineyard were certainly rare, but they did occur on a smaller scale in many families and communities. But for most deaf people in America, the land of opportunity held little for them until 1817. That is when a young minister named Thomas Gallaudet and his new friend Laurent Clerc, forever changed the course of Deaf history.

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Alice Cogswell Statue

A short time before 1817, Gallaudet met a Dr. Mason Cogswell who had a young daughter, Alice, who was deaf. Apparently, Gallaudet was quite fascinated by the challenge of communicating with and educating Alice. Dr. Cogswell eventually persuaded Gallaudet to travel to Europe, at the expense of Cogswell and some other interested parties, to study the methods being used there in educating deaf people. Gallaudet first traveled to England to study the method used by the Braidwood family, an oral approach, but he ran into trouble because the Braidwoods held their "methods" as business secrets and were reluctant to share them.

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Eventually, a somewhat frustrated Gallaudet met Laurent Clerc, a Deaf Frenchman. Clerc was traveling with a group from the National Royal Institution for the Deaf in Paris, demonstrating their educational techniques using French Sign Language. Gallaudet heard lectures given by Clerc and the others through an interpreter and was impressed that he decided to travel back to France with the group to study their techniques. [Clerc had gone to school at the Institut National des Jeune Sourds-Muets, which was the first public school for the deaf in the world, founded by a priest named Abbe De L'Epee, who became known as the "father of the deaf."]

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Gallaudet's money began to run low, and eventually word came that he would have to come back to America. Before he left, Gallaudet convinced Clerc to accompany him back to America. During the voyage to America, Clerc continued teaching Gallaudet French Sign Language, and Gallaudet taught Clerc English. Once back in America, these two men founded the first successful school for the deaf in the United States. There had been other schools earlier, including some efforts by a member of the Braidwood family, but none had succeeded. This new school was established in 1817 in Hartford Connecticut.



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The establishment of this school would have far reaching effects on the future of Deaf America. Had the earlier attempts at establishing oralist schools been successful, the Deaf community might have been very different. The Hartford school was vital to the formation of what is now referred to as Old ASL. This early form of ASL was a combination of the French Sign Language brought over by Clerc and the many other sign systems used by people who already lived here including the signs used on Martha's Vineyard. When the first students came to Hartford and learned this early form of ASL, they often took it back to their homes and taught it to other deaf people, and eventually, many of these early graduates of the Hartford school became teachers in other schools for the deaf around the country. So it is clear that the Hartford school played a key role in standardizing the language of the Deaf. Today Deaf people from one part of the country can travel to almost any other part and find people who use the same language (although ASL does vary somewhat from region to region just as English has several differing dialects often within relatively small distances).

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The changes away from the French Sign Language at the Hartford school began to appear almost immediately, and the language continues to change today, as do all other "living" languages. Approximately 60% of present-day ASL can be traced to its French roots. That is not to say that 60% of ASL is identical to LSF [Langues des Signes Francais (French Sign Language)], but rather that the relationship can still be traced. Even today, residential schools for the Deaf play a significant role in the standardization of ASL and the continuation of its culture.

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Overcoming Obstacles



Gallaudet University in Washington D.C., the only liberal arts university for the Deaf in the world, is something of a mecca for the Deaf and particularly so since the "Deaf President Now" protests in 1988. During these protests, seen by many people within the Deaf community as the revolution which finally opened the door to Deaf civil rights, the students shut down the campus for nearly a week. The school's Board of Trustees, which was comprised mostly of hearing people, passed over two Deaf candidates for university president and chose the only hearing one. Dr. Elizabeth Zinser, the board's choice, had no previous experience with the Deaf community. The protests captured global attention and eventually the students succeeded; Dr. Zinser resigned and Dr. I. King Jordan was named as the first deaf president in the school's 124-year history.

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But the Deaf community has suffered in the hands of well-meaning hearing people before, and sometimes misguided efforts at helping the deaf have almost destroyed what has become the language and culture of Deaf Americans. In 1880, the same year that the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) was founded to bring deaf people together to fight for common causes, in Milan, Italy the International Congress on Education of the Deaf voted 158 to 6 to recommend that oral methods of educating the deaf should be promoted over signing. Ironically, of the 164 delegates to the conference, only one was deaf. The hearing members of the American delegation voted against the proposal. The one deaf participant, also an American, was not allowed to vote.

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The Milan conference, along with growing belief throughout Europe that oralism was better than signing, created great concern to Deaf people who saw their language and culture threatened with extinction. Around the turn of the century, fears that ASL would be lost were so great that the NAD established a special fund specifically for the purpose of making films so that future generations could have something of their language after its use had been stopped. Yet ASL did survive. There have been periods when oralism has gained momentum and signing has always suffered in direct proportion, but the will of the community members to preserve their language and culture has prevented the demise once believed so inevitable. Deaf people have always refused to give up their associations with other Deaf people; whether through clubs, churches, or political organizations, ASL always found a home, a place where the people who use it maintain the right to do so.

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Understanding the origins of ASL should help people recognize that ASL is not a simple support device, a crutch for people with "broken" ears. It is a vivid, living, whole language which is limited only by the user's ability to use it, or lack thereof. Ironically, it is the limitations of the hearing people who have tried to learn ASL that has contributed a great deal to the myth that ASL can express only concrete ideas. It is impossible for people with limited abilities to ever unlock or comprehend the true potential of any language

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<http://tobermorey.com/deaf/aslhistory.php>