

History of Deaf Education in the United States

Part I

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Deaf Genes in Martha's Vineyard

Before we explain Utah Deaf history, it is important to talk about national Deaf history that has roots traced to Deafness commonplace on Martha's Vineyard, off the coast of Massachusetts for 250 years, beginning with a Deaf resident named Jonathan Lambert in 1694. The gene for Deafness was spread through generations of his descendants through intermarriage among the isolated islanders (Shapiro, 1994). Eighty-five percent of Deaf children had two hearing parents but most had other Deaf relatives (Roberts, 1994). On this island, there were no language barriers; the entire community used sign language, even when there were no Deaf members of the community present. Deaf islanders were full and equal participants in a bilingual society. They married hearing people and were respected and active members of their community, holding important posts. To the islanders, Deafness was normal, not a sickness, and it was not viewed as disabling because everyone was bilingual (Groce, 1985; Shapiro, 1994; Foster, 1998).

First Deaf School in America

In 1817, the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb (later named American School for the Deaf) was established in Hartford, Connecticut, by two men who became America's earliest and most influential educators of the Deaf: Thomas Hopkins

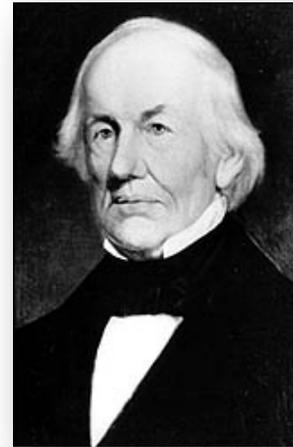


Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet
Photo courtesy of the Gallaudet
University Archives

Gallaudet, a hearing minister, and Laurent Clerc, an intellectual Deaf leader in France and father of American Deaf education. American Sign Language was created from Clerc's French sign language which was modified and also by signed communication brought to the school by Deaf students. This eventually became American Sign Language (ASL). Deaf students at this school were taught in ASL and became equally as literate as their hearing peers. With

teachers being fluent signers and teaching with ASL, literacy skills of their Deaf students were impressive (Shapiro, 1994).

The next generation of Deaf students then went on to become teachers and principals at schools for the Deaf. Over the years, this school served as the “Mother School” in providing a model educational program. Hundreds of these Deaf students went forth to become teachers to educate and to establish numerous schools for the Deaf all over the country, which spread sign language, and went on to found Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. in 1864 (Gannon, 1981; Shapiro, 1994). The concept of Deaf education was similar to bilingual education: ASL and written English were the language of instruction.

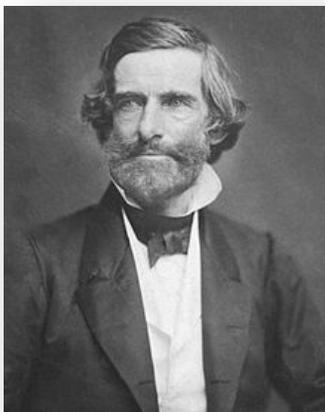


Laurent Clerc
Photo courtesy of the
Gallaudet University
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The Origins of Oral Movement

The origins of oral movement in the United States began in 1843, when two hearing American educators, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe and Horace Mann, who had no familiarity with Deaf people, went to Europe to study education systems. In Germany,

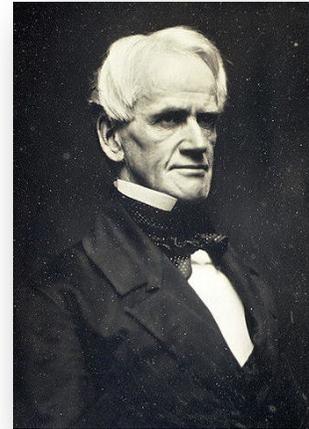
they were surprised to find Deaf children who could speak and read lips. Upon their return to America, Howe and Mann published a report strongly urging the instruction of speech and lip-reading. Some administrators in American schools for the Deaf decided that spoken methods could be used for certain individuals with partial hearing, especially those who had lost their hearing after acquiring



Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe
Source: Wikipedia

speech, but sign language would remain the dominant mode of instruction (Pace, 1946).

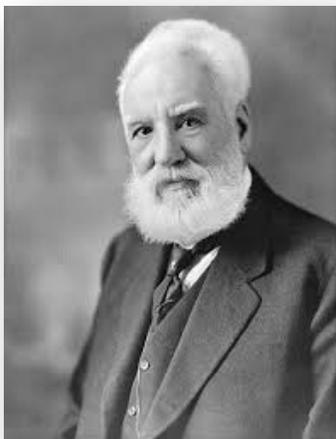
Interest in oral education began to surge. The next major development came when the first oral school, Clarke School for the Deaf, was founded in 1867 by a millionaire Bostonian named Gardiner Greene Hubbard, father-in-law to Alexander Graham Bell in Northampton, Massachusetts. It became the first permanent oral school for the Deaf in the United States. The second oral school, Horace Mann School for the Deaf, was founded as a day school in Boston, Massachusetts in 1869, and was the first school of this type ever established. Its first principal, Sarah Fuller, who retained the position for forty-one years, was Helen Keller's speech instructor. Shortly thereafter, these oral schools set the pattern of increasing number of the oral schools, especially the day schools, in the 1860s (Pace, 1946; Shapiro, 1994).



Horace Mann
Source: Wikipedia

The Most Influential Oral Advocate

In the 1870s, the most influential oral advocate in America, Alexander Graham Bell, re-emphasized speech training for Deaf Americans. His father, Alexander Melville Bell, was a master of phonetics and his mother, Eliza Grace, was hard of hearing. While she had enough hearing to use an ear tube for one-on-one conversations, Mr. Bell often used the manual alphabet to communicate with her. Ironically, he knew sign language well, but he insisted on speech as being the better method. His wife, Mabel Gardiner Hubbard, was Deaf, but she did not use sign language (Pace, 1946; Winefield, 1987).



Alexander Graham Bell
Source: Wikipedia

Most Americans know Dr. Bell as the inventor of the telephone. In 1876, at the age of 29, he patented a device to send the spoken word over a wire originally called the “electrical speech machine.” He thought it would benefit his wife and hoped the focused sound would be heard by the Deaf. Instead of benefiting his wife as Mr. Bell had hoped it would, the “electrical speech machine” now known as a telephone actually became a barrier to the Deaf! Due to Dr. Bell’s invention of telephone, he became famous and wealthy. He invested some of his wealth, in addition to his prestige and fame, into the oral movement (Gannon, 1981; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996).



Mabel Gardiner Hubbard
Photo courtesy of the
Alexander and Mabel Bell
Legacy Foundation

Throughout Dr. Bell’s life, he was interested in the education of Deaf people and was one of the most prominent proponents of oralism. He campaigned vigorously for oralism and full assimilation of Deaf people into hearing society, and was against sign language, intermarriage among Deaf people, and residential schools (Erting et al., 1989; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989; Shapiro, 1994; Parasnis, 1998).

Establishment of the National Association of the Deaf

Since the founding of the first Deaf school in Hartford in 1817, state associations of the Deaf were established in several states (Gannon, 1981). The National Association of the Deaf was established when Deaf representatives from numerous states gathered for its First National Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio in August of 1880 (Gannon, 1981; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989). The Cincinnati attendees were products of nearly 60 years of an American Deaf school system. These Deaf attendees held various positions, such as teachers, school founders, principals, businessmen and leaders. They were determined to improve Deaf people’s quality of life by opposing laws that would restrict their rights, determining to discourage imposters and Deaf peddlers, creating a better understanding

of Deafness by the public at large, pushing for better vocational training in the schools, providing better educational methods, and lastly, fighting employment discrimination (Gannon, 1981).

The Infamous Milan Congress of 1880

A few weeks after the establishment of the National Association of the Deaf, the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf met in Milan, Italy on September 11, 1880. In sharp contrast to the desires of Deaf people from throughout the world, they adopted the oral method as the “best” method in Deaf education (Van Cleve,



Edward Miner Gallaudet
Photo courtesy of the Gallaudet
University Archives

& Crouch, 1989; Parasnian, 1998; Shapiro, 1994). Oral advocates, who had organized the convention, agreed to promote speech methods and prohibit sign language. They voted overwhelmingly to support oral education. Out of more than 150 participants were present, James Denison, a Kendall School principal in Washington, D.C., was the only Deaf delegate to the Milan Congress. Only five, including Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet’s two sons, Thomas Gallaudet, Episcopal priest of St Ann’s Church for the Deaf and Edward Miner

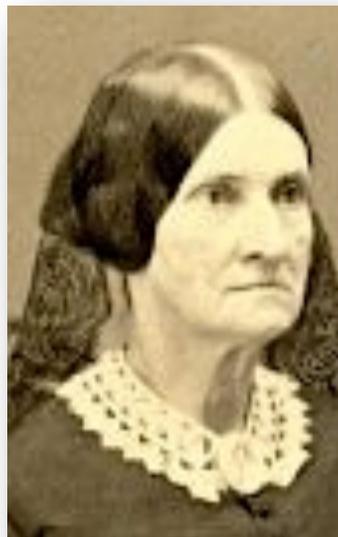
Gallaudet, president of Gallaudet College, were from the United States. Americans believed that sign language should be used as a method of instruction in the education of Deaf children. However, the majority oral advocates from Europe and United States voted to support the oral method to be used in Deaf education. Oral advocates in the United States were ‘excited about benefits of a victory engineered by European oralists,’ which resulted of the growth of the oral movement in America (Buchanan, 1850-1950, p. 25; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989).

Establishment of Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf

In 1890, the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf was founded and funded to promote the teaching of speech to the Deaf. Today, the organization is the world's largest organization focused on teaching spoken language to the Deaf. Dr. Bell's advocacy for oral education profoundly impacted the way the Deaf children were taught.

The Pendulum of Deaf Education

Despite Edward Miner Gallaudet's best effort to prevent the growth of pure oralism, the Milan decision and Dr. Bell's efforts, the pendulum of Deaf education in America towards the use of speech as the primary means of communication in the classroom for Deaf students, established the local oral day schools, eliminated sign instruction from residential schools, and replaced Deaf teachers with hearing instructors (Winefield, 1987; Parasnis, 1998). Dr. Bell's chief adversary, Dr. Edward Miner Gallaudet, espoused bilingual education of Deaf students, including those who were capable of spoken English. Dr. Gallaudet was raised by a Deaf mother, Sophia Fowler Gallaudet. Unlike Dr. Bell's mother, Sophia had no usable hearing, and she had unintelligible speech. She communicated in sign language. He saw her success, strongly influencing his opinions on communication methodologies. She not only influenced his choice of communication method, but also influenced his entire attitude toward Deafness (Winefield, 1987). However, following the Milan Conference, an oral education was promoted and bilingual education quickly declined.



Sophia Fowler Gallaudet
Photo courtesy of the Gallaudet
University Archives

Dismissal of Deaf Teachers

After the Milan Conference ended, hundreds of Deaf teachers in Europe were dismissed from their jobs in favor of hearing teachers who did not know sign language. Sign language was banned in the majority of schools for Deaf children (Buchanan, 1850-1950; Erting et al., 1989; Shapiro, 1994).

In the United States, most Deaf leaders and teachers urged favor of the combined system of instruction as the primary means of educating Deaf children. They battled ferociously to defend the residential schools and to preserve sign language. However, hearing educators in favor of the oral method prevailed. With the strong oral movement, Deaf principals lost their jobs to hearing people. Deaf teachers were not totally eliminated from the school were usually assigned to teach older children who were labeled, “oral failures.” These teachers could no longer pursue academic subjects (Buchanan, 1850-1950; Erting, et al., 1989). Erting et al. (1989). It was stated that oralism had taken its toll. Deaf children’s academic achievement was far from satisfactory and Deaf people at large thought of their language and themselves as inferior and inadequate, as they had so often been told by those educators who were in control of their education.

Survival of the Deaf Community

Despite suppression of sign language in the educational system, Deaf communities around the world continued to survive. Since 1880, Deaf people maintained their languages and communities in spite of efforts to prevent them from associating with one another. At residential schools, sign language was passed on from Deaf parents to their own Deaf children and to the other Deaf children through interaction with their peers as well as the few Deaf adult employees. While sign language was banned from the classroom, it was used freely in the dormitories and on the playgrounds of residential schools. Furthermore, people continued to socialize at their clubs, compete in Deaf sport events, publish newspapers and magazines, and participate in the state associations to improve their lives (Buchanan, 1850-1950; Erting et al., 1989; Parasnis, 1998).

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