

# History of ASL

Despite theories and speculation that all of human language has its roots in signed gestures and hand signals that served as an early form of communication, it is impossible to say for sure whether or not language developed in this manner. The history of sign language cannot therefore claim for itself the origins of all spoken language, but its roots do extend farther back than most people would imagine.

## TIMELINE

5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.-- According to the American Sign Language Dictionary on CD-ROM, the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates thought it perfectly logical for deaf people to communicate using their hands, heads, and other body parts, being naturally deprived of the use of their hearing.

4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.-- Aristotle made the observation that people who are deaf are often also dumb, a statement that translated poorly into other languages, apparently causing the unwarranted association of deafness with stupidity and unteachability which lasted for many centuries to come.

1520-1584-- Pedro Ponce de León created a system of gestures to aid in the education of the deaf, working mainly with the de Velasco family of Spain.

1579-1629-- De León's system was falsely credited to Juan Pablo Martin Bonet, who is often thought to be the father of sign language.

1680-- George Dalgreno developed a manual alphabet called the Didascalocophus. Dalgreno's alphabet required two hands and assigned each letter a spot on the fingers or palm of the right hand, which were pointed to by the left index finger or thumb.

1715-1780-- Jacob Rodriguez Pereira is credited with spreading de León's alphabet across Europe, adapting it slightly to incorporate thirty handshapes which corresponded to sounds.

Late 18<sup>th</sup> century-- Up to this point in history, any attempts to educate the deaf were done on a small, private scale-- both de León and Pereira instructed children of noble families (where recessive genes tended to appear). This tendency changed with the creation of a National Institution for Deaf-Mutes in France, one of the first schools to attempt instruction of the deaf. The Abbé de l'Épée, the founder of the French Institute, thought that the simple series of handshapes already in common use by the deaf (known

as Old French Sign Language, or OFSL) could be modified to use "correct" French grammar. L'Épée advocated the usage of affixes and created a system that essentially reproduced spoken French with the hands.

1793-- William Thornton, an American, wrote an article calling attention to the fact that there were no schools for deaf children in America, almost two hundred years since the landing of the Pilgrims.

1808-- The Abbé Sicard, l'Épée's successor, who preferred OFSL and its lack of traditional French grammar, compiled a two-volume dictionary of hand signs.

1815-- Thomas Gallaudet, an American, went to Europe with the hopes of learning a method of teaching deaf children. He studied at the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes under Laurent Clerc (1785-1869).

1817-- Clerc and Gallaudet founded the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons in West Hartford, Connecticut (now known as the American School of the Deaf). This was the first permanent public American school for the deaf. Clerc was America's first deaf teacher of the deaf, and is responsible for bringing OFSL to America, where it would play a large part in the development of American Sign Language. (Sixty percent of ASL signs come from OFSL.)

1853-- The New England Gallaudet Association of the Deaf was founded to address concerns of education of deaf children, discrimination, and a general lack of public understanding about deafness.

1864-- The National Deaf-Mute College (now Gallaudet University) was founded by Gallaudet's son Edward, who was fluent in ASL as well as English. The school was authorized by Abraham Lincoln to confer college degrees. Women were first admitted to the college in 1887. (By comparison, Middlebury College began accepting women in 1883.)

1864-- Bernard Engelsman, a teacher from Vienna, founded the first pure oral school in America (teaching speech instead of sign), which later became known as the New York Institution for the Improved Instruction of Deaf Mutes.

1880-- An international convention of educators of the deaf met in Milan, Italy. They outlawed the use of sign language for educational purposes, despite the protests of the 5 Americans present.

1880s-- The founding of the National Deaf-Mute College (and other schools for the deaf) represented a major step in the legitimization of sign language as an accepted means of communication. However, despite Gallaudet's work, sign was deemed inappropriate and was replaced by the oral method (speaking and lip-reading). Alexander Graham Bell was one of the oral method's biggest proponents, claiming that deaf people

should not be allowed to marry other deaf or hearing impaired persons, as their genes would perpetuate deafness. This marked the beginning of a period commonly known as the "Dark Ages", when sign language was not taught, and was considered inappropriate.

1950s-- William Stokoe, a professor at Gallaudet University became interested in the use of sign language among students. His book, Sign Language Structure, examined sign language and showed that it stands up to the "tests" of a language, with its own grammar, sentence structure, etc. Sign finally began to reemerge as a legitimate language.

1960s-- Total Communication, the idea that deaf students can learn from a combination of sign language and oral methods (speech and lip-reading) emerged and was embraced as a new philosophy of teaching.

1967-- The National Theatre of the Deaf was founded. Performances include both speaking and signing actors, who work together to perform for mixed deaf and hearing audiences.

1980-- Closed Captioning was available for the first time on television.