

Name _____ Class · period _____ Date _____

THE SHORT VERSION

Laurent Clerc (1785–1869) was a Deaf teacher from France who sailed to America with Thomas Gallaudet, helped open the first school for the Deaf in the United States, and brought the French signs that ASL still carries today.

EARLY LIFE IN FRANCE*A kitchen fire, a late start at school, and a meeting that changed everything***01 A FIRE, AND A SCHOOL**

- 01 A fire permanently changed the course of Laurent's life when he was only one year old.
- 02 He was born to a comfortable situation in France. He fell off of his high chair into the kitchen fire and was badly burned.
- 03 It is believed that this accident and the subsequent fever were the source of his lifelong deafness and lost sense of smell.
- 04 Despite the efforts by his parents to reverse his condition, Laurent was suddenly left with fewer prospects.
- 05 Laurent received no official schooling until another Laurent Clerc, his uncle and godfather, stepped in when he was 12.
- 06 Laurent was then enrolled in the *Institut National des Jeunes Sourds-Muets*, a school for the Deaf in France, and his life took a turn for the better.

02 MEETING THOMAS GALLAUDET

- 01 Laurent caught up quickly on his education, eventually becoming a beloved teacher at the institute.
- 02 It was during this time that he crossed paths with Thomas Gallaudet in London, and Laurent's life was forever changed once again.
- 03 Gallaudet, future co-founder of the first school for the Deaf in America, visited Laurent in France and was impressed with his teaching methods.

- 04 Gallaudet asked Laurent to be a part of his plans to educate the Deaf in the United States, and he agreed to join the venture.

LAURENT'S WORK IN AMERICA

A school in Hartford, an address to Congress, and the French roots of ASL

03 BUILDING SOMETHING NEW

- 01 Laurent left his homeland and immediately began applying his skills by teaching Gallaudet sign language on the journey from France to America.
- 02 Once on American soil, Laurent worked with Gallaudet and others to raise funds for the new school: speaking, fundraising and rounding up future students.
- 03 By 1817 their goal was accomplished and the school opened in Hartford, Connecticut.
- 04 Only a year later, Laurent was the first Deaf individual to address the U.S. Congress.
- 05 Laurent went on to become a key figure in training teachers of the Deaf, who came from all across America to benefit from his expertise.
- 06 It was his work with students ranging from ages 6 to 40 that has had the most lasting impact: American Sign Language (ASL) was and still is heavily influenced by the French signs Laurent first brought to the country.

PERSONAL LIFE AND LEGACY

A first in Deaf history, and a name sign drawn from a scar

04 PERSONAL LIFE

- 01 Laurent made history in his personal life as well. He married Eliza Crocker Boardman in 1818, the first recorded Deaf marriage in the United States.
- 02 Deeply devoted to his work, not much is shared about Laurent's hours outside of education, although he did have 6 children, 4 of whom survived past infancy.
- 03 His childhood accident left him with a significant scar on one side of his face that defined the sign for his name.
- 04 Laurent's legacy is not linked to his physical differences, but rather his distinguished character and career.

05 HIS INFLUENCE TODAY

- 01 It is difficult to measure the expansive influence Laurent Clerc has had on Deaf culture, from language to learning to teaching methods, the establishment of new schools for the Deaf and more.
- 02 Memorials have been made, honorary degrees awarded, plays performed, buildings dedicated and books written in honor of Laurent Clerc.
- 03 As his *New York Times* obituary states, his character held the respect of those around him — and that has held true across the almost 150 years since his death.

His ability, zeal and graces of character made him always respected and beloved.

THE NEW YORK TIMES OBITUARY FOR LAURENT CLERC, 1869

06 NAMES AND TERMS TO KNOW

NAME OR TERM	WHY IT MATTERS IN THIS STORY
Institut National des Jeunes Sourds-Muets	The school for the Deaf in France where Laurent was finally educated at 12, and where he later taught.
Thomas Gallaudet	The American who met Laurent in London, visited him in France, and asked him to help educate Deaf students in the United States.
Hartford, 1817	Where and when the first school for the Deaf in America opened, after Laurent and Gallaudet raised the funds.
Eliza Crocker Boardman	Laurent's wife, married in 1818 in the first recorded Deaf marriage in the United States.
French signs	What Laurent brought with him across the Atlantic, and what ASL is still heavily influenced by today.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer in complete sentences using what you read

07 WRITTEN RESPONSE

01 What happened to Laurent when he was one year old, and what is believed to have caused his deafness?

02 Laurent had no official schooling until he was 12. Who changed that, and what happened after?

03 What did Laurent do during the voyage from France to America, and why was it important?

04 Name two firsts Laurent achieved in the United States.

05 Laurent's name sign came from the scar on his face. What do you think that says about how name signs work in Deaf culture?

- 06** ASL is still heavily influenced by the French signs Laurent brought over. Why does that make him important to anyone studying ASL today?

08 WHERE THIS INFORMATION COMES FROM

Great Deaf Americans (2nd ed.) Matthew Scott Moore and Robert F. Panara

“Laurent Clerc: Apostle to the Deaf People of the New World” Loida R. Canlas

Obituary for Laurent Clerc The New York Times, July 19, 1869